

Augustine — WisdomForge Booklet — Ages 15-18

Augustine: The Restless Self

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About This Book

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) is not a simple figure. He was a North African bishop, a philosopher, a memoirist, a theologian, and one of the most psychologically acute writers who ever lived. He invented the genre of autobiography as we know it. He anticipated modern psychology by sixteen centuries. He shaped Western civilization more than almost any other thinker.

He was also deeply flawed. His treatment of women was a product of his time and remains troubling. His adversarial writings against the Jews have a dark legacy. His most severe doctrines on predestination have caused centuries of theological anguish. This booklet does not pretend Augustine was perfect. It presents him as he was: brilliant, restless, honest about his own failures, and still worth reading 1,600 years later.

This booklet covers six themes that trace the arc of Augustine's thought. Each chapter engages the ideas seriously — not as historical curiosities but as living questions that still matter. You don't have to agree with Augustine to learn from him. You just have to be willing to wrestle with the questions he asked.

Chapter 1: The Restless Heart — Cor Inquietum

The Opening

The *Confessions* begins with a sentence that has echoed through Western culture for sixteen centuries:

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”
(I.1)

This is not a preface. It is a thesis. Everything that follows — the pear tree, the Manichaean years, the garden conversion, the meditation on time — is an illustration of this single claim: human beings are made for something the world cannot give, and the restlessness we feel is the evidence.

The Anthropology

Augustine's word for this condition is *cor inquietum* — the restless heart. It is his fundamental anthropology: his account of what human beings are.

The restless heart is not mere dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction can be solved: if you're dissatisfied with your job, you can find a better one. If you're dissatisfied with your apartment, you can move. Augustine is talking about something deeper — a hunger that survives every attempt to satisfy it.

Consider his own trajectory. He tried:

- **Intellectual achievement** — He became the foremost rhetorician in the Roman world. It left him empty.
- **Philosophical system** — He spent nine years as a Manichaean, a dualistic religion that promised to explain evil. It couldn't answer his questions.
- **Professional prestige** — He held the chair of rhetoric in Milan, the imperial capital. He was famous, respected, well-paid. He was miserable.
- **Sexual pleasure** — He lived with a concubine for fifteen years and fathered a son. He does not deny the pleasure. He says it did not fill the hole.
- **Friendship** — He loved a friend who died, and the grief nearly destroyed him.

Each of these is a genuine good. Augustine does not call them worthless. He calls them *lesser goods* — real, beautiful, capable of giving temporary pleasure, but structurally unable to satisfy the hunger that drives the restless heart. The hunger is not for any of these things. It is for God. And until it finds God, it keeps moving.

The Neoplatonic Framework

Augustine did not invent the restless heart out of nothing. His anthropology has deep roots in Neoplatonic philosophy, particularly in Plotinus's concept of *exitus* and *reditus* — the soul's departure from the One and its return.

For Plotinus, the soul emanates from the One (the supreme principle of reality), descends into the material world, and then gradually ascends back toward the One through philosophical contemplation. The soul is restless because it is away from its source.

Augustine transforms this framework in three crucial ways:

1. **The One becomes a person.** In Plotinus, the One is an impersonal principle. In Augustine, the One is God — a personal being who addresses you, pursues you, calls you by name. The return is not a philosophical ascent but a personal encounter.
2. **The return requires grace, not just effort.** In Plotinus, the soul returns through its own philosophical effort. In Augustine, the soul cannot return by its own power. It has been damaged by sin. Grace must act first.
3. **The return happens in time, through history.** Plotinus's ascent is abstract — the soul transcending matter through contemplation. Augustine's return is embedded in history: a child's voice in a garden, a Scripture passage, a baptism in a cathedral. Grace arrives through concrete events.

The Modern Resonance

Whether or not you share Augustine's theology, his anthropology maps onto modern psychology with striking precision:

The Hedonic Treadmill. Modern psychology has documented what Augustine observed: we adapt to our circumstances. A new achievement produces a temporary spike in happiness, followed by a return to baseline. Augustine would say: the treadmill is the restless heart. It's not a design flaw. It's a design feature. It's supposed to keep moving until it finds what it was made for.

The Divided Self. Augustine's account of the will that knows the good but cannot do it (Confessions VIII.9) is the first systematic description of what psychology calls *akrasia* — weakness of will, the gap between knowing and doing. Modern psychology describes this as cognitive dissonance, approach-avoidance conflict, or simply being stuck. Augustine describes it as the condition of every human being who has not been healed by grace.

Object Relations Theory. Augustine's claim that love directed toward mortal things becomes a source of suffering anticipates the insights of object relations theory — the psychoanalytic school that focuses on how our relationships shape our sense of self. When we treat another person as the ultimate source of our happiness, we burden them with a weight they cannot bear.

The Question

Augustine's restless heart raises a question that every thoughtful person has to answer: what are you really hungry for? Not what do you want right now — but what is the hunger that drives the wanting? Is it possible that the achievements, the relationships, the experiences you're chasing are not what you're really looking for — that they're proxies for something deeper?

Augustine's answer was God. You might answer differently. But the question is worth taking seriously. Because if Augustine is right — if the hunger is structural, not circumstantial — then no rearrangement of external circumstances will ever satisfy it. The solution, if there is one, has to come from somewhere else.

Words to Remember *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* — Augustine, *Confessions* I.1

Discussion Questions 1. Augustine distinguishes between "dissatisfaction" (which can be fixed by changing circumstances) and "restlessness" (which cannot). Do you think this distinction is valid? Have you experienced both? 2. Augustine lists five things he tried to satisfy the restless heart: intellectual achievement, philosophical system, professional prestige, sexual pleasure, friendship. What would your list be? What have you tried? 3. The hedonic treadmill — the psychological finding that we adapt to our circumstances — seems to confirm Augustine's observation. But does it? Is there a difference between "we always want more" and "we were made for God"? 4. Augustine's three transformations of Neoplatonism (personal God, grace, historical embeddedness) are what make his thought distinctively Christian. Can you imagine a secular version of the restless heart? What would it point toward?

Chapter 2: The Divided Will — Akrasia and Grace

The Problem

Augustine's most psychologically sophisticated work is in Book VIII of the *Confessions*, where he analyzes his own moral paralysis with a precision that still takes your breath away.

The problem is this: Augustine knows what he should do. He is intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity. He wants to change his life. And he cannot.

"The mind commands itself to will, and the mind is indeed itself, yet it does not do it."
(*Confessions* VIII.9)

This is *akrasia* — weakness of will, the gap between knowing and doing. It's not ignorance. Augustine is not confused about what's right. It's not apathy. He cares deeply. It's a structural problem: the will is divided against itself. Part of him wants to change. Part of him doesn't. And the two parts paralyze each other.

The Famous Prayer

"Give me chastity and continence, but not yet." (*Confessions* VIII.7)

The prayer is funny because it's honest. Augustine wants virtue — he just doesn't want it now. He wants to change — he just doesn't want to change today. The desire for the good is real. So is the resistance to the good. And both desires coexist in the same mind.

Modern readers sometimes find this prayer cynical or self-indulgent. Augustine intended neither. He was praying the only prayer he could pray — a prayer that mixed genuine aspiration with genuine resistance. God, he believed, could work with honesty even when honesty was ugly.

The Will as Battleground

Augustine's analysis of the divided will goes deeper than a simple conflict between "what I want" and "what I should want." He argues that the will is not a single thing that can simply choose the good. The will is itself divided — fragmented by competing desires, each pulling in a different direction.

This is what makes moral change so difficult. It's not that I need more information — I already know what's right. It's not that I need more motivation — I already want to change. The problem is that "I" am not a single, unified agent. I am a collection of competing desires, and the desire for the good does not automatically win.

Augustine's account anticipates modern psychology in several ways:

- **Dual-process theory.** The mind has fast, automatic responses (System 1) and slow, deliberate ones (System 2). Augustine describes something similar: the habituated desires that pull automatically vs. the rational will that tries to direct them.

- **Addiction psychology.** The experience of knowing a behavior is destructive but being unable to stop is the core of addiction. Augustine's analysis of his sexual habits reads like a modern addiction memoir.
- **Cognitive dissonance.** The discomfort of holding contradictory beliefs or desires — and the mental strategies we use to reduce that discomfort — are all present in Augustine's self-analysis.

The Solution: Grace

Here is where Augustine makes his most controversial move. He argues that the divided will cannot heal itself. Willpower alone is insufficient because the will itself is the problem. What is needed is not more effort but a different kind of help — what Augustine calls *grace*.

Grace, in Augustine's theology, is God's unmerited action in the soul. It is not something you earn. It is not something you achieve. It arrives — and when it arrives, it heals the division that the will could not heal on its own.

This is the meaning of the garden scene. Augustine has been fighting himself for months. He is weeping under a fig tree. He hears a child's voice: "Tolle lege — take up and read." He picks up Paul's letters. He reads Romans 13:13-14. And the paralysis breaks.

"No further words did I require. At the end of the sentence, it was as if a light of utter confidence shone in my heart." (Confessions VIII.12)

What broke the deadlock? Not more willpower. Not a better argument. Not a new piece of information. Something arrived — Augustine calls it grace — that healed the division from outside. The will that could not unify itself was unified by something other than itself.

The Philosophical Challenge

You don't have to be a Christian to engage with Augustine's insight here. The philosophical question is: can the self heal itself? If the self is divided, can one part of the self fix the other part? Or does healing require something from outside — a relationship, a community, an experience, a grace that you can't manufacture on your own?

Modern therapy implicitly answers "no" — that's why therapists exist. You can't be your own therapist because the part of you that needs healing is the same part that would be doing the healing. You need an external perspective, an external relationship, an external intervention.

Augustine is making the same argument, but about the soul rather than the psyche. The divided will cannot heal itself. It needs grace. Whether you call that grace God, therapy, community, love, or something else, the structural insight is the same: some problems cannot be solved from inside the system that created them.

Words to Remember *"The mind commands itself to will, and the mind is indeed itself, yet it does not do it."* — Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.9

Discussion Questions 1. Augustine says the will is "divided against itself." Is this your experience? When have you known what was right, wanted to do it, and still couldn't? 2. "Give me chastity, but not yet." The prayer is honest, but is it a cop-out? Is there a difference between

being honest about your resistance and using honesty as an excuse to keep resisting? 3. Augustine argues that the divided will cannot heal itself — that healing requires grace from outside. Do you agree? Can you think of a time when you couldn't solve a problem from inside yourself and needed external help? 4. If grace is "unmerited" — not something you earn — does that mean effort is pointless? How do you reconcile the need for grace with the need for human effort?

Chapter 3: Evil as Privation — The Problem of Suffering

The Problem

The problem of evil is the oldest and hardest question in philosophy: if God is all-powerful and all-good, why does evil exist?

Augustine spent nine years as a Manichaean because Manichaeism offered a simple answer: evil exists because there are two equal and opposite principles — Light (good) and Darkness (evil) — and the material world is the battlefield where they clash. Evil is not God's fault because God did not create it.

The answer is emotionally satisfying but intellectually incoherent. If there are two ultimate principles, neither is truly ultimate. If darkness is co-eternal with light, then light is not the source of all that is. The Manichaean solution collapses the concept of God.

Augustine eventually found a different answer — one that became foundational to Western theology.

Evil as Privation

Augustine's solution is the doctrine of *privatio boni* — evil as the privation of good. Evil is not a substance. It is not a "thing" that exists in its own right. It is the absence of good, the way darkness is the absence of light, or a hole is the absence of cloth.

This sounds abstract, but it solves a real problem. If evil is a substance, then God must have created it — which makes God the author of evil. But if evil is a privation — an absence, a distortion, a corruption of something that is already good — then God created only good things, and evil is what happens when good things are damaged or misdirected.

Consider the pear tree theft. Augustine and his friends stole pears not for gain but for the thrill of transgression. The theft was evil — but it was not the creation of a new substance. It was the misuse of a good capacity (the ability to choose, to act, to desire). The evil was in the bending of a good thing toward a wrong end.

The Free Will Defense

Augustine connects evil-as-privation to the doctrine of free will. God created human beings with the capacity to choose — which is a supremely good thing. A world of creatures who could only do good would be a world of automatons, not a world of persons. The capacity for genuine

love and genuine goodness requires the capacity for genuine choice — which means the capacity to choose wrongly.

Evil enters the world not because God creates it but because free creatures misuse their freedom. The darkness is the shadow cast by the light of free will. You can't have one without the other.

This is the *free will defense* — the argument that God permits evil because the alternative (a world without free will) would be worse. It doesn't solve every problem (what about natural disasters? what about the suffering of animals?), but it addresses the core issue: moral evil is the price of moral freedom.

The Pear Tree and the Mystery of Sin

Augustine's analysis of the pear tree theft (Confessions II) is his most personal engagement with the problem of evil. He eliminates every practical motive — they didn't need the pears, weren't hungry, didn't eat them — and arrives at the most disturbing motive of all: they stole because it was wrong. The thrill was in the transgression itself.

"It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own ruin." (Confessions II.4)

This is what Augustine calls the "mystery of sin" — the fact that human beings sometimes choose evil not for any practical benefit but for the experience of choosing against the good. It's not ignorance. It's not necessity. It's a perverse freedom — the will asserting itself by breaking the rule, not because the rule is wrong but because it is a rule.

The mystery of sin is the deepest form of evil-as-privation. The good that is being privated is the right ordering of the will itself. The will was made to choose the good. When it chooses evil for evil's sake, it is not creating something new — it is destroying its own orientation. It is cutting itself off from its own purpose.

The Limits of the Solution

Augustine's *privatio boni* doesn't solve every version of the problem of evil. Three challenges remain:

1. **Natural evil.** Earthquakes, diseases, and animal suffering don't seem to result from human free will. Augustine explained some of this as the consequence of the Fall — a cosmic disordering that affected nature itself — but this raises as many questions as it answers.
2. **The severity of evil.** Even if evil is a privation, it can be devastating. Calling evil "an absence" doesn't make the Holocaust less horrific. The philosophical explanation doesn't address the existential scream.
3. **The origin of the privation.** If evil is the absence of good, where did the first absence come from? If the will was created good, what caused it to turn away from the good? Augustine's answer — "a defect of the will" — can feel circular.

These challenges don't necessarily defeat Augustine's position, but they show its limits. The *privatio boni* is a philosophical framework, not a theodicy that silences all objection. It tells you

what evil is (absence, not substance). It doesn't tell you why God *allows* it in the specific quantities and forms we experience.

Words to Remember “*Evil is not a substance. It is the privation of good — as darkness is the absence of light.*” — Augustine (paraphrased from *Confessions* III.7 and *Enchiridion* 3-11)

Discussion Questions 1. Augustine says evil is not a “thing” but an absence — the privation of good. Does this help? Does calling evil an absence make it less real, or does it clarify what kind of reality it has? 2. The free will defense says that the possibility of evil is the price of genuine freedom. Is this a good trade? Would you prefer a world without free will if it meant no evil? 3. The pear tree theft reveals that humans sometimes choose evil for evil's sake — not for gain, not for pleasure, but for the thrill of transgression. Have you experienced this? What does it suggest about the nature of the human will? 4. Augustine's solution doesn't fully address natural evil (earthquakes, disease). Does this undermine his position, or is it a limitation that any theodicy would face?

Chapter 4: Time and Memory — The Philosophy of Interiority

The Question

In Book XI of the *Confessions*, Augustine asks a question that has fascinated philosophers ever since:

“What is time? Who can explain it easily and briefly? Who can comprehend it in thought, so as to utter a word about it? But what do we mention more frequently, in our conversation, than time?” (*Confessions* XI.14)

The question sounds simple. It is not. Time is the most familiar thing in our experience — we live in it constantly — and the most mysterious. What is it? Is it a thing? A relationship? A feature of consciousness? A creation of God?

Augustine's Analysis

Augustine's analysis of time is one of the most remarkable passages in ancient philosophy. He begins by noting the paradox: we speak of time as having parts — past, present, future — but the past no longer exists, the future does not yet exist, and the present, if it had no duration, would not be time at all.

“So it is not properly said that there are three times: past, present, and future. Perhaps it would be more correct to say: there are three times — the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future.” (*Confessions* XI.20)

What does he mean? The “present of the past” is memory — the past as it exists now, in our minds. The “present of the present” is attention — the immediate awareness of what is happening now. The “present of the future” is expectation — the future as we anticipate it now.

Augustine's conclusion is revolutionary: time is not an objective feature of the external world. It is a feature of consciousness. The past exists in memory. The future exists in expectation. The present exists in attention. Time is interior — it lives in the mind.

This anticipates Immanuel Kant by fourteen centuries. Kant argued that time is not a property of things-in-themselves but a form of human perception. Augustine got there first, through introspection rather than philosophical system-building.

Time as Creature

Augustine goes further. He argues that time itself is a creature — something God made, not something God inhabits. God does not exist *in* time. God exists *outside* time, in an eternal present that has no before and after.

This means that creation did not happen *at a point in time*. Time began with creation. “There was no ‘before’ the world was made,” Augustine writes, “because there was no time before the world.” (Confessions XI.13) The question “What was God doing before he created the world?” is meaningless, because there was no “before.” Time is part of the created order.

This anticipates modern cosmology. The Big Bang theory says that space and time began together, at the moment of creation. Augustine said the same thing in 400 CE, not from physics but from philosophy.

Memory and the Self

Augustine's analysis of time is part of a larger project: the exploration of the interior life. He is the first thinker to systematically examine the self from the inside — to make the self the subject of philosophical inquiry.

In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine turns to memory. He describes it as a vast interior landscape — a storehouse of images, emotions, skills, and experiences. But memory is not just a filing system. It is the place where the self lives. Without memory, there is no continuous self — just a series of disconnected moments.

Augustine's exploration of memory anticipates modern psychology in several ways:

- **The unconscious.** Augustine notes that memory contains things we are not currently aware of but can retrieve. He describes the experience of trying to remember something and feeling it “somewhere” in memory, just out of reach — a description of what Freud would call the preconscious.
- **Procedural memory.** Augustine distinguishes between things we remember as facts (what we ate for dinner) and things we remember as skills (how to read). Modern neuroscience makes the same distinction.
- **Identity.** Augustine argues that memory is what makes us the same person over time. If you lost all your memories, would you still be you? Augustine's answer is nuanced: the self is grounded in memory, but also in the ongoing act of consciousness — the “I” that is aware of remembering.

Why This Matters

Augustine's philosophy of interiority — his turn inward, his exploration of memory, time, and the self — is one of the most influential moves in Western thought. It is the foundation of what we now call psychology, autobiography, and existential philosophy.

When you write in a journal, you are doing what Augustine invented. When you reflect on your motivations, you are doing what Augustine modeled. When you ask “Who am I, really?” you are asking Augustine's question.

The *Confessions* is not just a religious book. It is the first sustained exploration of the inner life in Western literature. It created the template for every memoir, every diary, every act of introspective self-examination that followed.

Words to Remember *“There are three times: the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future. These three are in the soul, and I do not see them elsewhere.”* — Augustine, *Confessions* XI.20

Discussion Questions 1. Augustine says time exists in the soul — in memory, attention, and expectation — not in the external world. Do you agree? Is time subjective or objective? 2. Augustine argued that time began with creation — that there was no “before” the universe. This anticipates modern cosmology by 1,600 years. What does it suggest about the relationship between philosophy and science? 3. Augustine is the first thinker to systematically explore the inner life — memory, self-awareness, motivation. When you examine your own thoughts and feelings, are you doing something Augustine invented? Or is introspection natural and universal? 4. If memory is what makes you the same person over time, what happens to the self when memories are lost? Are you still “you” if you can't remember who you were?

Chapter 5: Love and Loss — The Augustinian Theology of Grief

The Pattern

Augustine's life is a study in loss. He lost his closest childhood friend to sudden death. He lost the woman he lived with for fifteen years when he sent her away to pursue a socially advantageous marriage. He lost his son Adeodatus to illness in adolescence. He lost his mother Monica at Ostia, shortly after the most profound spiritual experience of their lives.

Each loss taught him something different. Together, they form Augustine's theology of grief — one of the most psychologically acute accounts of mourning in ancient literature.

The Unnamed Friend

The first great loss was a friend — probably a childhood companion from Tagaste — who died while Augustine was teaching in his hometown. Augustine's grief was overwhelming.

“My heart was darkened over with grief, and whatever I looked at was death.” (Confessions IV.4)

He couldn't eat. He couldn't sleep. Every street, every house, every shared memory was a wound. He fled to Carthage, hoping distance would heal him. It didn't.

What he learned from this loss was that love changes who you are. "I had made my soul into another by the loving of him." (Confessions IV.6) The friend had become part of Augustine's identity. When the friend died, a part of Augustine died too.

But Augustine also diagnosed what was wrong with his grief. He had loved his friend "as if he would never die" — as if the friend were God. The friend was a creature, not the Creator. To love a created thing as if it were ultimate is to set yourself up for devastation. Not because love is bad, but because created things are temporary, and treating the temporary as eternal guarantees heartbreak.

The Concubine

The most troubling loss is the unnamed woman Augustine lived with for fifteen years. She bore him a son. When Monica arranged a marriage to a girl of proper social standing, the concubine was dismissed. She returned to Africa, vowing never to take another man. Augustine wrote that his heart "was ripped apart and bleeding." (Confessions VI.15)

Modern readers are right to be troubled. Augustine doesn't name her. He doesn't apologize to her. He presents the separation as part of his spiritual journey. The woman's perspective is entirely absent.

This is a genuine failure in Augustine's moral imagination. He was a product of a deeply patriarchal culture that did not treat women as full moral agents. His theology of love — which is profound — was not applied with equal rigor to the woman who had been his companion for fifteen years. We can learn from Augustine's insights about grief while being honest about his blind spots.

Adeodatus

Augustine's son died as an adolescent. Augustine mentions the death almost in passing, with a restraint that scholars interpret as profound grief held in check. Adeodatus had been brilliant — he participated in philosophical dialogues with his father and showed extraordinary gifts.

The loss of a child is a particular kind of grief. Augustine doesn't analyze it the way he analyzes the loss of his friend. He simply notes it and moves on. The silence may be the most eloquent thing in the *Confessions*.

Monica

Monica died in Augustine's arms at Ostia, shortly after they shared a vision of God that Augustine describes as the most profound experience of his life. Monica's last words were:

"One thing alone delighted me in this life — that I might see you a Catholic Christian before I died. My God has done this for me, and more." (Confessions IX.10)

Augustine's account of Monica's death (Confessions IX) is one of the most moving passages in ancient literature. He describes his struggle to weep — the social expectation that a bishop

should not show grief in public — and his eventual surrender to tears. He prays for her, asks others to pray for her, and reflects on what her life meant.

The Theology of Grief

Augustine's theology of grief, drawn from these losses, has several strands:

1. **Grief is love continuing.** The pain of loss is not a sign that love was a mistake. It is a sign that love was real. If the friend had not mattered, his death would not have hurt. The grief is the love, continuing in a different form.
2. **Love must be rightly ordered.** To love a created thing as if it were ultimate is to set yourself up for devastation. This doesn't mean you should love less. It means you should love with an awareness that created things are temporary. The love endures; the object of love does not.
3. **The hope of reunion.** Augustine came to believe that the people we love are held by God and that, in the end, love is stronger than death. This is a theological claim, not a psychological technique. It doesn't make grief go away. It gives grief a context.
4. **Grief is not selfish.** Augustine is clear that grief is not simply self-pity. It is the recognition that something genuinely good has been lost. The world is poorer for the loss. Grief is the appropriate response to that poverty.

The Modern Resonance

Augustine's theology of grief maps onto modern grief counseling with surprising accuracy. The idea that grief is "love continuing" is now a standard therapeutic insight. The idea that love must be "rightly ordered" — that clinging too tightly to the deceased can prevent healing — is the basis of grief therapy's work on "continuing bonds." The idea that grief is not selfish but a recognition of real loss is the foundation of modern grief theory's rejection of the "get over it" model.

Augustine didn't have grief counseling. He had his own experience, his faith, and his extraordinary capacity for honest self-reflection. What he produced is a theology of grief that still has something to teach us — not because it's perfect, but because it's honest.

Words to Remember *"I had made my soul into another by the loving of him."* — Augustine, *Confessions* IV.6

Discussion Questions 1. Augustine says he loved his friend "as if he would never die" and that this was a mistake. What does he mean? Is it possible to love someone deeply while accepting their mortality? Or does love always involve a kind of denial of death? 2. The unnamed concubine is a moral blind spot in Augustine's story. Can you appreciate Augustine's insights about grief while being honest about his failure toward the woman he lived with for fifteen years? How do you hold both? 3. Augustine says grief is "love continuing in a different form." Does this resonate with your experience of loss? Does it change how you think about grief? 4. Augustine's theology of grief includes the "hope of reunion" — the belief that the dead are held by God and that love is stronger than death. Is this a helpful belief? Can grief be meaningful without it?

Chapter 6: The Two Cities — Political Theology for a Falling World

The Sack of Rome

In August 410, the Visigoths under King Alaric sacked Rome. It was the first time the city had been breached by a foreign enemy in 800 years. The psychological impact was catastrophic. The Roman Empire was the most powerful political entity the world had ever known, and if Rome could fall, what couldn't?

Pagans blamed the Christians. The argument: Rome had been strong when it worshipped the old gods. Christianity had abandoned the old gods, and the old gods had abandoned Rome. The sack was divine punishment.

Augustine, fifty-six years old and bishop of Hippo, heard the panic. He spent the next thirteen years writing a response. It became *The City of God* — one of the most important books in Western history.

The Argument

The City of God is a massive work — twenty-two books covering everything from Roman history to Platonic philosophy to the nature of evil to the end of the world. But its central argument is simple.

There are two “cities” — two communities formed by two different loves:

- **The City of Man** (*civitas terrena*) is formed by the love of self, even to the contempt of God. It is the city of power, ambition, wealth, and pride. It can be magnificent. Rome at its height was magnificent. But every earthly city eventually falls. Babylon fell. Assyria fell. Rome fell. Every kingdom built on the love of power contains the seeds of its own destruction.
- **The City of God** (*civitas Dei*) is formed by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. It is the city of truth, justice, mercy, and love. It has no walls. It has no army. It cannot be invaded because it is not a place on a map. It is wherever people love what is good more than they love themselves.

The two cities are mixed together in every human life and every human society. You can't draw a clean line between them. But they have different foundations and different ends. The City of Man passes away. The City of God endures.

What This Means

Augustine is not saying that earthly politics don't matter. He was a working bishop who cared about his city deeply. He is saying that earthly politics are not ultimate. They are good, they are important, they are worth working for — but they are not the thing that lasts.

This is a radical claim. It means that no political system — not even the best one — can be the ultimate hope of human beings. Every political system will eventually fail. Every empire will

fall. Every revolution will disappoint. This is not pessimism. It is realism. The City of Man is temporary by nature.

But it also means that political failure is not the end. If the City of Man is all there is, then every political defeat is a catastrophe. But if there is a City of God — a reality deeper than politics, more enduring than empires — then the fall of even the greatest city is not the end of the story. It's a chapter.

The Critique of Empire

The City of God is also a critique of empire. Augustine argues that the Roman Empire was built not on justice but on the *libido dominandi* — the lust for domination. Rome's greatness was real, but it was the greatness of a bandit who has grown powerful enough to act with impunity. "If justice is absent, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers?" (City of God IV.4)

This is a devastating critique — and it applies to every empire, not just Rome. The British Empire, the Soviet Empire, the American imperium: all are built on the same foundation. They can do good. They can build roads and schools and hospitals. But their foundation is power, not justice, and power without justice is robbery at scale.

Augustine's political theology has been enormously influential. It shaped medieval Christendom's understanding of the relationship between church and state. It shaped the Reformation's critique of papal power. It shaped the American founders' distinction between temporal authority and ultimate allegiance. Anyone who says "my country, right or wrong" has not understood Augustine.

Augustine's Death

Augustine lived to see his own city fall. In 429, the Vandals invaded North Africa. In 430, they laid siege to Hippo. Augustine was seventy-five, dying, and surrounded.

He didn't panic. He didn't flee. He asked for the Psalms to be written on the wall above his bed so he could read them as he died. He prayed. He comforted the frightened. He faced the end of his city and the end of his life with the same conviction he had preached for forty years: the City of Man falls, but the City of God endures.

He died on August 28, 430. The Vandals took Hippo a few months later and burned the city. But Augustine's library survived. His books survived. And 1,600 years later, we are still reading them.

The City of Man fell. The City of God stood.

The Two Cities and You

You are growing up in a world that is obsessed with the City of Man. Social media, grades, college admissions, career, money, fame — these are the currencies of the earthly city. They're not evil. They're temporary. They can be good in their place. But if they're all you're working for, you're building something that will eventually fall.

Augustine's challenge is to invest in both cities, but to know which one lasts. Work hard at your studies — but know that wisdom matters more than grades. Build friendships — but know

that the love, not the social status, is what endures. Pursue your goals — but know that who you become matters more than what you achieve.

The City of God is not a far-off heaven. It's here, now, wherever people choose love over fear, truth over lies, service over power. Every act of kindness is a brick in the City of God. Every moment of honesty is a stone. Every time you help someone who can't help you back, you're building something that no army can destroy.

Words to Remember *"The two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city by the love of self extending to contempt of God, the heavenly city by the love of God extending to contempt of self."* — Augustine, *City of God* XIV.28

Discussion Questions 1. Augustine says every earthly city eventually falls. Is he right? Can you think of an empire or political system that lasted "forever"? What does the inevitability of political failure mean for how we should invest our lives? 2. "If justice is absent, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers?" Augustine's critique of empire is devastating. Does it apply to modern states? Is there a difference between a just government and a powerful one? 3. Augustine says the City of God is "wherever people love what is good more than they love themselves." Is this a useful definition? Can you identify moments in your own life when you were building the City of God vs. the City of Man? 4. Augustine died while his city was under siege, reading the Psalms. What would you want to be reading, or thinking about, if you knew the world was falling apart around you? What would be your "City of God" in that moment?

Afterword: The Augustinian Legacy

Augustine's influence is difficult to overstate. He shaped the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and modern philosophy. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who rediscovered Augustine's Paul. John Calvin built his theology of grace on Augustine's foundations. René Descartes's *cogito* ("I think, therefore I am") has Augustinian roots — Augustine wrote "I am most certain that I am" (*Si fallor, sum*) over a thousand years earlier. Modern psychology, with its interest in the divided self and the unconscious, owes more to Augustine than most psychologists realize. Existentialist philosophers — Heidegger on time, Camus on the search for meaning — found in Augustine a precursor to their own questions.

Augustine was not perfect. His treatment of women, his adversarial writings against the Jews, and his most severe doctrines on predestination have been justly criticized. The challenge is to learn from him without ignoring his failures — to take his insights seriously while being honest about his blind spots.

His central question — what is the human heart hungry for? — is as urgent today as it was in 400 CE. You don't have to share his answer to take the question seriously. You just have to be willing to sit with it.
