

Companion guide
for the video program

PIONEERS
of the
Spirit

Augustine
of Hippo

Gateway Films
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Pioneers of the Spirit AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Background

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is one of the great, foundational theologians in Western Christianity. Even sixteen centuries later, Augustine's penetrating understanding of Christian truth comprises the underpinnings of much current theology. Perhaps this can be accounted for not only as a result of his brilliance as a scholar, but also as a result of his painstaking honesty regarding the human experience, particularly the human search for meaning, and the frankness with which he acknowledges the difficulty human beings have coming to grips with God's essential role in that search.

Augustine's life was one in which his sympathies, relationships, and ambitions were constantly changing, evolving. He received a Christian education as a boy at the insistence of his deeply devout mother, Monica, but abandoned the faith when a youth at the University of Carthage. This led to years of rebellious conflict with his mother. He was also emotionally scarred at a young age by the death of his closest boyhood friend, only increasing Augustine's restlessness and habitual transience. He traveled the Mediterranean teaching rhetoric for several years, and when his ambition led him to seek civil office, he broke his relationship with a low-born mistress in order to advance his career, even though the relationship had produced a son. The memory of those painful losses and guilty choices spurred him on to throw himself even more passionately into his promising career in the Roman civil service. Eventually, he attained the chair of rhetoric in Milan.

In Milan, Augustine came under the influence of the highly regarded Bishop Ambrose and was given the opportunity to debate Christian theology with members of Ambrose's devout circle. In 386, Augustine himself experienced one of the best known conversion experiences in Christian literature. He was baptized in 387 and intended to live the life of a monastic, but once again events took an unexpected turn when, on a visit to Hippo to attend a sick friend in need of a priest, he was seized by the people of the community who compelled him to accept ordination. He became a priest in 391, coadjutor bishop in 395, and to his death presided as sole bishop over the see of Hippo.

Augustine's autobiographical work, the *Confessions*, remains a classic achievement in its analysis of the emotional side of Christian experience in light of the reality of human sin. No author prior to Augustine had exposed his human struggles, his inner conflicts, in the way Augustine did in the *Confessions* and to this day there is much in it with which human beings deeply identify. In fact, Augustine has been called the first modern person.

Augustine eventually discovers that divine light exposes the truth that his identity, all identity, is ultimately found in God. He finds that only God can unify the psyche's complex memory of all the aspects of one's humanity and integrate the chaos of guilt, unhappiness, restless wandering, and sin which mark those histories. He is singularly honest about the broken aspects of what it means to be a human being, yet finds hope, healing, and redemptive meaning in the homecoming which is God. As a bishop and pastor, Augustine exemplified what twentieth century theologian, Henry Nouwen, calls "the wounded healer." Augustine is indeed a man whose wounded history became a source of life for others.

Questions for Discussion

What is your reaction to the suggestion that thinking is an active conversation with God, that religious reflection is a kind of prayerful exchange with God? How does this idea reorient one's consciousness? Do you think many modern theologians think of their work this way?

Recalling all the various events in his life, Augustine looks back over his "wanderings" from the perspective of one who has finally found a "home," an integrated identity resting in God. He confesses to God "You were there before me, but I had departed from myself." What do you think Augustine means by this?

Augustine is extremely interested in analyzing how he grew and changed as a human being. He realizes that the person he became was both different from who he once was, and yet he understands himself as somehow the same; a continuous, evolving being. He identifies God as the source of both change and continuity. Upon reflection, how and where do you understand God's presence in your autobiography? Does this way of viewing your "story" help you to make sense of where life has led you? Of who you are?

As an author, Augustine was uniquely honest in confessing in writing the choices and driving passions which led him to pursue certain paths in his life which he regretted in retrospect. As our video pointed out, Augustine made this honest confession to God, and he views the writing of his autobiography as an act of prayer which springs from God first longing for our reconciliation. Augustine understands God to be his guide in this process. Where in our lives as modern Christians are there opportunities for the same kind of moral inventories? What has your experience been of this kind of spiritual exercise in the development of your spirituality?

Do you think our failures and tragedies are redeemed by God in the way Augustine understands them to be? What is necessary for this to happen?

Augustine concludes that restless love is always on the move because the objects we have chosen to love are not adequate to our real, ultimate desires as human beings. God, for Augustine, is the only fully satisfying object of our love. What do you believe?

Augustine's conversion is a moving story of how a very successful, even brilliant person can be dramatically reoriented to see God at the center of their life through a series of events that are not easy to explain "rationally". For Augustine, this mysterious moment of recognition was experienced as God giving him a very clear and direct personal message. What do you think of this kind of subjective, supernatural experience of God? Have you or someone you know had a similar experience of God? Are you suspicious of such experiences? Do you embrace them?

Augustine came to believe that attaching ourselves, ultimately, to things which will pass away leads to our suffering, and that in the search for satisfaction and happiness only ultimate concerns reap true and lasting rewards. Philip Turner observed that this runs against the grain of modern consciousness. Where in our culture do you see the modern consciousness most at odds with Augustine's belief in this regard?

Practical Application Suggestions

St. Augustine's *Confessions* presents us with a portrait of discipleship which costs, the opposite of the notion of "cheap grace." He finds that God's call creates a willingness to relinquish those parts of ourselves which obstruct a deepening relationship with God, and that a spiritual inventory of one's life is a first step toward a life of detachment from those things which hinder our freedom to experience God's love and forgiveness.

The observance of the rite of reconciliation is growing in emphasis in some churches. Have you had to deal with reconciliation in your own life? Do you have relationships in need of reconciliation? How is or would your life be different if you seek reconciliation?

For Further Reading

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