

Study Guide for Confessions by Saint Augustine of Hippo

Why Read *Confessions*?

All classics yield their treasures more fully when we approach the book with the right expectation so as not to get frustrated and leave the book unfinished. *Confessions* is not easy to read but it is the hope with the right framework and openness of heart – we will find a treasure chest full of gold!

What the *Confessions* is not....

The *Confessions* is usually classified as an autobiography and according to experts is an inaccurate labelling. It is autobiographical but not an autobiography. Its structure resembles entries in a personal journal more than an autobiography. It is arranged chronologically of St. Augustine's life and written in first person account but does more than just discuss his life.

What the *Confessions* is....

Confessions is a mixed genre book – a **mosaic of diverse parts**. It is a memoir, autobiographical in nature, retrospective, and an assessment of what was happening to the author at various points in his life. It is also a book of prayers where it is almost conversational in quality as though Augustine and God are engaged in a continuous dialogue.

Augustine had flair for composing concise memorable statements... he has a way with words. For example:

“The punishment of every disordered mind is its own disorder.”

— **St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions***

“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.”

— **Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions***

Now let's read *Confessions* and find our nuggets of gold.

Reading Plan

Date	Reading Section	Study Guide	Comments
4/10/2024	Introduction Book 1	Book 1 Questions	Pages xv - 21
4/17/2024	Book 2 Book 3	Book 2 Questions Book 3 Questions	Pages 25 - 51
4/24/2024	Book 4 Book 5 *ch.I -XI	Book 4 Questions Book 5 Questions (only those that apply to the reading)	Pages 55-89 (top of 89)
5/1/2024	Book 5 *ch XII -XIV Book 6	Book 5 remaining questions Book 6 Questions	Page 89 – 114
5/8/2024	Book 7 Book 8 *ch. I -VI	Book 7 Questions Book 8 Questions (only those that apply to the reading)	Page 117 -137 Page 141 – 152 (top of 152)
5/15/2024	Book 8 *VI – XII Book 9	Book 8 remaining questions Book 9 Questions	Page 141 – 160 Page 163 - 185
5/22/2024	Book 10 *ch.I - XXXV	Book 10 Questions (only those that apply to the reading)	Page 189 -221 (middle of page)
5/29/2024	Book 10 *ch.XXXVI – XLIII Book 11	Book 10 remaining questions Book 11 Questions	Page 221 – 229 Page 233 - 257
6/5/2024	Book 12	Book 12 Questions	Pages 261-286
6/12/2024	Book 13	Book 13 Questions	Pages 289 - 321

The reading plan is tentative, and things may shift. If the group agrees we could(?) flow over into the beginning of the summer if the book is taking longer to digest.

Study Questions

Use the questions below to help facilitate/increase your understanding of the text. We discuss our readings each week and review all or some of the questions below (depending on time). In addition, during discussion we will also reflect on: what hit you the most? What nuggets of gold did you find? What areas were difficult? What are you still pondering today?

NOTE: While reading *Confessions*, download Sophia Project's Study Guide on Augustine's Confessions Books One – Nine. We will be using this guide from time to time to help us understand the cultural and historical detail of Augustine's time. This link will take you to the study guide so you can print/download the guide:

http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/russo_confessions.pdf.

Book One: The First Fifteen Years

1. Why is this book entitled "confessions?" What is the double meaning of the word "confessions?"
2. How would you describe the first six paragraphs of the book? What does it read and sound like?
3. What is Augustine's evaluation of a baby's "innocence?" Why do you think this is important?
4. Under what circumstances did Augustine want to be baptized as a Christian? Why did his mother defer his wish?
5. What kinds of sins did Augustine commit as a boy? What basic mistake did he make that set him on a dangerous spiritual path?

Book Two: The Sixteenth Year

1. What is Augustine's idea of two loves? Where does this idea come from? With what did he confuse it?
2. The episode of the theft of the pear is a very famous one. What exactly is the point? How did his friendships at this time contribute to this sin?

3. How did the variation in the faith of his mother, Monica, and his father, Patricius (Patrick) affect Augustine? How did his father set a bad example for him? How did he set a good example for him before his death?

Book Three: From Sixteen to Eighteen

1. Why wasn't Augustine happy as a student at Carthage? How was this related to his love of theater?
2. How did his discovery of Cicero's *Hortensius* (now lost) set him on a new path? What did he discover in the book?
3. Who are the Manichees, and why did fall in with them? Did Augustine believe in God?
4. What are the three human lusts? Why do you think Augustine cites these three lusts as recorded in 1 John 2?
5. What was Monica's dream? What did it mean?

Book Four: From Eighteen to Twenty-Seven

1. What kind of work and profession did Augustine pursue in his twenties?
2. How did Augustine react to the death of his friend? What made his sorrow so heavy?
3. Under the influence of Mani, how did Augustine misperceive evil and good? How did he misperceive God and God's nature?

Book Five: Aged Twenty-Eight

1. How does Paragraph 1 recapitulate the themes of the Confessions? Have you noticed how most of the Books of the Confession begin in this way?
2. How did Augustine's encounter with the Manichean bishop Faustus shatter his belief in Mani's religion?
3. How did Augustine's curiosity about natural science help to free him from Manichee religion? Was this new science, though good, good enough in itself to satisfy Augustine's thirst for truth?
4. Why was Augustine attracted to Ambrose, the Catholic bishop of Milan? How did this help in his conversion? What did Ambrose teach him about how to interpret the Old Testament apart from its literal sense? (Remember that Mani rejected the whole Old Testament because he thought it taught evil things about God)

Book Six: Aged Twenty-Night

1. What was the point of the anecdote of the laughing beggar?
2. What analogy can you make between Alypius' futile attempt to resist the temptation of the gladiatorial games and St. Augustine's life? How does this tell us about Augustine's view of temptation and the will?
3. Do you find chapter xv of Book Six troubling? If so, what exactly troubles you? What seems to trouble St. Augustine about it?

Book Seven: Aged Thirty

1. Where did Augustine get the idea that what remains constant is better than that which is changeable?
2. Where did Augustine get the idea that matter might be the source of evil? Does he accept his idea?

3. What is the argument about Jesus Christ in chapter xix?
4. What does Augustine learn from his re-discovery of the Letters to St. Paul?

Book Eight: Aged Thirty-One

1. In Book Eight, chapter v., St. Augustine analyzes his interior struggle as the warfare of his conflicting wills. What is your view of the psychological authenticity of this passage?
2. Who is St. Anthony of Egypt? What is his story, and why is it so affecting? What is Augustine's response to it?
3. What happens in the garden in Milan?
4. Why does the issue of chastity and continence loom so large in Augustine's conversion to Christianity?

Book Nine: Aged Thirty-Two

1. Now that Augustine has become a Christian, what happens to his family? His mother? His son? How does he deal with these tragedies? How is his grief different now as a Christian?
2. How do Psalms help Augustine? Read Psalm 4 and consider why Augustine was attracted to it.

Further Thinking: Do the first nine books of *Confessions* give glory to God? Is so, how?

Book Ten: Augustine's Confession of His Preset

1. How does Augustine think his book will help others?
2. Why is memory important in spiritual development (ch. viii)?
3. How do we learn to love God through the loves of our senses?
4. At ch. xxiii, Augustine discusses the relationship between happiness and truth. What is the only way to find happiness?
5. How is the beautiful prayer (ch. xxvii) connected to Augustine's discussion on the human senses?
6. Augustine asserts that happiness is a natural inclination of all human hearts, but what prevents us from achieving it? (This question asks you to reflect on the most central theme of the whole book. Give it some thought....)

Book Eleven: In the Beginning God Created

1. What does Augustine believe about God and time?
2. What is the purpose of Book Eleven?

Book Twelve: Heaven and Earth and Book Thirteen: The Days of Creation

1. What was the purpose of dedicating this book and Book Thirteen to Creation? What is the theme?

2. Why does Augustine discuss Genesis at all?
3. Why is the final reflection on Genesis 1 so important? What does Augustine find there?
4. Why, for Augustine, are signs and sacraments necessary?

Further thinking: Are Books Eleven – Thirteen a fitting conclusion to Augustine's *Confessions*? How do these books relate to Book Ten and the rest of the work? What gives unity to *Confessions* as a whole?