

the eye of my mind would have been clearer and so might in some way have been directed towards Your truth which abides for ever³³ and knows no defect. But as usually happens, the man who has tried a bad doctor is afraid to trust even a good one: so it was with the health of my soul, which could not be healed save by believing, and refused to be healed that way for fear of believing falsehood. Thus I was resisting Your hands,³⁴ for You first prepared for us the medicine of faith and then applied it to the diseases of the world and gave it such great power.³⁵

V

(7) From this time on I found myself preferring the Catholic doctrine, realising that it acted more modestly and honestly in requiring things to be believed which could not be proved—whether they were in themselves provable though not by this or that person, or were not provable at all—than the Manichees who derided credulity and made impossible promises of certain knowledge, and then called upon men to believe so many utterly fabulous and absurd things because they could not be demonstrated. Next, Lord, with gentle and most merciful hand You worked upon my heart and rectified it. I began to consider the countless things I believed which I had not seen, or which had happened with me not there—so many things in the history of nations, so many facts about places and cities which I had never seen, so many things told me by friends, by doctors, by this man, by that man: and unless we accepted these things, we should do nothing at all in this life. Most strongly of all it struck me how firmly and unshakeably I believed that I was born of a particular father and mother, which I could not possibly know unless I believed it upon the word of others. Thus You brought me to see that those who believed Your Bible, which You have established among almost all peoples with such authority, were not to be censured, but rather those who did not believe it, and that I must give no heed to any who might say to me: “How do you know that those Scriptures were given to mankind by the Spirit of the One true and most true God?” For this point above all was to be believed; because no assault of fallacious questions which I had read in such multitude in the philosophers—who in any event contradicted each other—could constrain me not to believe both that You are, though what might be Your nature I did not know, and that the government of human affairs belongs to You.

³³See Ps. 116(117):2.

³⁴See Ps. 16:8(17:7); Dan. 4:32(35).

³⁵As Augustine writes in *On True Religion*, God uses two principal ways of healing the wounds of sin: reason and the authority of faith (24.45).

(8) But though I held these truths sometimes more strongly, sometimes less, yet I always believed both that You are and that You have a care of us: even if I did not know what I must hold as to Your substance, or what way leads to You—or leads back to You. Thus, since men had not the strength³⁶ to discover the truth by pure reason and therefore we needed the authority of Holy Writ, I was coming to believe that You would certainly not have bestowed such eminent authority upon those Scriptures throughout the world, unless it had been Your will that by them men should believe in You and in them seek You.

Now that I heard them expounded so convincingly, I saw that many passages in these books, which had at one time struck me as absurdities, must be referred to the profundity of mystery. Indeed the authority of Scripture seemed to be more to be revered and more worthy of devoted faith in that it was at once a book that all could read and read easily, and yet preserved the majesty of its mystery in the deepest part of its meaning: for it offers itself to all in the plainest words and the simplest expressions, yet demands the closest attention of the most serious minds.³⁷ Thus it receives all within its welcoming arms, and at the same time brings a few direct to You by narrow ways:³⁸ yet these few would be fewer still but for this twofold quality by which it stands so lofty in authority yet draws the multitude to its bosom by its holy lowliness. So I dwelt upon these things and You were near me, I sighed and You heard me, I was wavering uncertainly and You guided me, I was going the broad way of the world and You did not forsake me.

St. Augustine and the Drunken Beggar

VI

(9) I was all hot for honours, money, marriage: and You made mock of my hotness.³⁹ In my pursuit of these, I suffered most bitter disappointments, but in this You were good to me since I was thus prevented from taking delight in anything not Yourself. Look now into my heart, Lord, by whose will I remember all this and confess it to You. Let my soul cleave to You⁴⁰ now that You have freed it from the tenacious hold of death. At that time my soul was in misery, and You pricked the soreness of its wound, that leaving all things it might turn to You, who are over all⁴¹ and without whom all would return to nothing, that it might turn to You and be healed.⁴²

³⁶Literally, “when we were weak.” See Rom. 5:6.

³⁷Literally, “of those who are not light of heart.” See Ecclus.(Sir.) 19:4.

³⁸See Matt. 7:13–14.

³⁹See Ps. 2:4, 36(37):13.

⁴⁰See Ps. 62:9(63:8), 72(73):28.

⁴¹See Rom. 9:5.

⁴²See Isa. 6:10; Matt. 13:15.

I was in utter misery and there was one day especially on which You acted to bring home to me the realisation of my misery. I was preparing an oration in praise of the Emperor in which I was to utter any number of lies to win the applause of people who knew they were lies.⁴³ My heart was much wrought upon by the shame of this and inflamed with the fever of the thoughts that consumed it. I was passing along a certain street in Milan when I noticed a beggar. He was jesting and laughing and I imagine more than a little drunk. I fell into gloom and spoke to the friends who were with me about the endless sorrows that our own insanity brings us: for here was I striving away, dragging the load of my unhappiness under the spurring of my desires, and making it worse by dragging it: and with all our striving, our one aim was to arrive at some sort of happiness without care: the beggar had reached the same goal before us, and we might quite well never reach it at all. The very thing that he had attained by means of a few pennies begged from passers-by—namely the pleasure of a temporary happiness—I was plotting for with so many a weary twist and turn.

Certainly his joy was no true joy; but the joy I sought in my ambition was emptier still. In any event he was cheerful and I worried, he had no cares and I nothing but cares. Now if anyone had asked me whether I would rather be cheerful or fearful, I would answer, "Cheerful": but if he had gone on to ask whether I would rather be like that beggar or as I actually was, I would certainly have chosen my own state though so troubled and anxious. Now this was surely absurd. It could not be for any true reason. I ought not to have preferred my own state rather than his merely because I was the more learned, since I got no joy from my learning, but sought only to please men by it—not even to teach them, only to please them. Therefore did You break my bones⁴⁴ with the rod of Your discipline.⁴⁵

(10) Let my soul pay no heed to those who would say: "It makes a difference what one is happy about. The beggar found joy in his drunkenness, you sought joy in glory." But what glory, Lord? A glory not in You.⁴⁶ For my glory was no truer than his joy, and it turned my head even more. That very night he would sleep off his drunkenness: but how often and often I had gone to bed with mine and woken up with it, and would in the future go to bed with it and wake up with it. It does indeed make a difference what one is happy about: I know it, and I know that the happiness of a sure

⁴³Panegyrics of this kind were a common part of the orator's life. According to Henry Chadwick, Augustine most likely delivered this speech to Emperor Valentinian II on November 22, 384.

⁴⁴See Ps. 41:11(42:10).

⁴⁵See Ps. 22(23):4.

⁴⁶See Jer. 9:24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17.

hope is incomparably beyond all such vanity. And there was indeed a difference between him and me—for he was much the happier man: not only because he was soaked in his merriment while I was eaten up with cares, but also because he by wishing luck to all comers had at least got wine, while I by lying was aiming only to get empty praise.

I spoke much to this effect to the friends that were with me: and I often observed that it was with them as it was with me, and I found it very ill with me. So I worried and by worrying doubled the ill. And when by chance prosperity smiled in my direction, I lacked the spirit to seize it, for it fled away almost before I could get my hand upon it.

VII

(11) We were gloomy together with such thoughts, I and those who were closest to me. I discussed the problem especially with Alypius⁴⁷ and Nebridius.⁴⁸ Alypius was born in the same town as I. His parents were of high rank there. He was younger than I, indeed he had studied under me both when I began my teaching in our native town and afterwards at Carthage. He was much attached to me because he thought me kindly and learned, and I to him because of the great bent towards virtue that was so marked in him so young. But at Carthage the maelstrom of ill morals—and especially the passion for idle spectacles—had sucked him in, his special madness being for the Circus⁴⁹. When he first came into the grip of this wretched craving, I had set up a school for the public and was teaching rhetoric. He had not come to me as a pupil because of some difference that had arisen between his father and me. I discovered that he was quite fatally devoted to the Games, and I was much worried because it seemed to me that so much promise was to be thrown away, or had already been thrown away. But I had no way of advising him or forcibly restraining him, neither the good will of a friend nor the right of a master. For I took for granted that he would feel about me as his father did. In fact he did not. He took his own line in the matter rather than his father's, and fell into the way of greeting me when we met and of coming sometimes into my school to listen awhile and be off again.

(12) But it had passed from my mind that I could do anything to prevent the waste of so good a mind in the blind and ruinous pursuit of the empty

⁴⁷Alypius was a native of Thagaste, born after 354 into a family nobler than Augustine's; he died sometime around 427 or 428. Most of what we know about him comes from Augustine's writings.

⁴⁸See note on IV.3.6.

⁴⁹Although the "Circus Games," or simply "The Games," specifically designated chariot races, they could also signify other forms of spectacle.