Augustine and Prayer

by

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Introduction
Augustine of Hippo (354-430), the great ‘Church Father’ from whose writings Luther and Calvin contributed so much to the Reformation, “never wrote what could be called a treatise on prayer.” (Thomas Hand) His nearest approach to an extended treatment of the subject - a letter to a wealthy noble widow who had sought his advice - merely delineates the kind of people we must be in order to pray acceptably, and develops a few valuable suggestions on prayer that are useful for the Christian’s journey towards the full enjoyment of God.

His Expositions on the Psalms, though not specifically a study of prayer, throw much light on how Christ and His Church express their union and communion through prayer, and how believers may make the psalmists’ prayers their own.

The Confessions weave in and out of prayer so much that they may be justly regarded as one prolonged prayer; yet they offer no direct teaching on the subject.

For their part, the Sermons, Soliloquies, Treatises, Letters and Retractations cast up many valuable thoughts on prayer, not to mention some priceless gems in the form of particular prayers offered to God by Augustine himself; but they too offer no systematic treatment.

In view of this absence, perhaps the most we can distill from the vast and varied array of available material is “not a system or method” of prayer, but “a general orientation with recurrent themes and characteristic emphases.” (Rebecca Weaver) What we can distill, however, may well revolutionize our whole view and practice of prayer.
Augustine on Prayer

1. Prayer as Holy Desire
Lying at the root of all Augustine’s teaching is his conviction that all prayer springs from holy desire. This, he says, is because “the whole life of a good Christian is holy desire,” and prayer is the offering up of that desire to God. “Your very desire is your prayer;” he tells us, “if your desire is continuous, your prayer is continuous.”

Peter Brown offers a valid reason for placing holy desire at the root of Augustine’s teaching on prayer: he was keenly conscious that he would never attain perfection in this life, and that what he desired most ardently - to embrace God the chief Good and the Fountain of Truth - would never be more than a hope. The most he could do, therefore, was “to ‘yearn’ for this absent perfection, to feel its loss intensely, to pine for it.” It is this yearning for intimacy with God that imparts such depth to his prayers. In one place, for example, he asks his fellow believers: “Do we not all long for the future Jerusalem? . . . I cannot refrain from this longing . . . Indeed,” he adds, “in this sweet yearning I seek some small consolation.”

Near the close of his astonishing Confessions, too, we find him praying that God would close him in to Himself, “leaving outside” those who waste their lives “filling their eyes with earth.” “Let me enter into my chamber and sing my songs of love to Thee, groaning with inexpressible groaning in my distant wandering, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart stretching upwards in longing for it.”

Similarly, we find him, after reading the sentence: ‘With thee is the fountain of life; in thy light shall we see light,’ (Psa 86.9) urging his hearers: “Long for this light; for a certain fountain, a certain light, such as your physical eyes do not know; a light, to see which the inward eye must be prepared; a fountain, to drink of which the inward thirst is to be kindled. Run to the fountain, long for the fountain.” This is not
mysticism, but the language of one who has entered within the veil and gazed with wonder on the God of his salvation.

Neither must we forget Augustine’s ardent temperament, coupled with his deep sense of his own sinfulness and the ever-present menace of spiritual enemies, as a strong contributory factor to his view of prayer. Our souls, he reminds us, walk through “a limitless forest, full of unexpected dangers.” Indwelling sin, in a heart easily allured by a corrupt world and pestered by the malice of these enemies, continually squeezes from our beleagured hearts earnest longings for deliverance. For himself, he speaks graphically of being “roasted daily in the oven of men’s tongues.”

Usually in his remarks on prayer he speaks for all believers. As strangers and pilgrims journeying towards the immediate presence of our God, we often cry out with the psalmist (Psalms 42.1-2; 63.1-2) for Him to slake our thirst in the desert of this world and strengthen us for what lies ahead. After all, “longing . . . is the thirst of the soul.” Prayer is thus “the heart’s longing for God, the relentless petitioning of God for the secure happiness of the life to come.” (Rebecca Weaver) And so, he concludes: “Now is prayer, so long as there is thirst: [but] when thirst shall have passed away, there praying passes away, and there succeeds praising.”

Whatever form true prayer takes, he insists, therefore - whether supplication or praise, invocation or confession, intercession or thanksgiving - it always contains holy desire. His key texts for this claim are Psalm 27.4 - “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple,” and Matthew 7.7 - “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”

This holy desire at the root of prayer is not of our own making. It springs from the new life that God has graciously put within His
people. It is a life “lived with God” and “derived from Him,” a life in which “we love God . . for what He is in Himself, and ourselves and our neighbours for His sake.” It was in order that we might obtain this life that “He who is Himself the True Blessed Life” dwelt among us and “taught us to pray.”

When by His grace we are careful to cherish this desire, we begin to “pray without ceasing.” (1 Thess 5.17) This is not the same as “much speaking,” for “multiplied words are one thing, long-continued warmth of desire is another.” In this connection, Augustine issues a stern warning for us to ensure that our words do not express more than we desire; if they do, we are mocking God, not praying. To pray without ceasing is “to have the heart throbbing with continued pious emotion towards Him to whom we pray.”

Our Lord Himself exemplified this kind of praying when He spent whole nights in prayer and in His agony in the garden. (Luke 6.12; 22.43) From Him we learn that “in most cases prayer consists more in groaning than in speaking, in tears rather than in words.” Yet for our comfort we must remember that our gracious God “sets our tears in His sight, and our groaning is not hidden from Him.” Besides, He “does not need human words.”

Our “brethren in Egypt,” he reminds us, kindled this holy desire, not by praying interminably, but by offering frequent yet brief ejaculatory prayers. We may follow their example, and also set aside “stated hours and seasons” to keep the desire aflame. As long as other duties are not neglected, “it is neither wrong nor unprofitable to spend much time in praying.”

2. Prayer from Within

“There is in man,” claims Augustine, “an area which not even the spirit of man knows of.” This ‘real self’ lies hidden in the depths. It is the hidden realm of all our desires and motives, loves and hates, choices and rejections. Though it may never “translate into action” it
is nonetheless “real and morally revealing.” (Bonnie Kent) Yet God is with us in those depths, and we may cry to Him there. Because God is “deeper than my inmost being,” he says, experience of Him must be inward. Formalism - offering God our lips when our hearts are far from Him - is something Augustine dreads.

Besides, being essentially desire for God tending towards delight in Him, prayer must be rooted in the heart because it is the seat of all our affections. “There is One who hears prayer,” he reminds us while condemning certain superstitions; therefore “do not hesitate to pray; but He who hears abides within. You need not direct your eyes towards some mountain; you need not raise your face to the stars, or to the sun, or to the moon; nor must you suppose that you are heard when you pray beside the sea: rather detest such prayers. Only cleanse the chamber of your heart; wherever you are, wherever you pray, He who hears is within . . . He . . is not beyond you; you have not to travel far, nor to lift yourself up so as to reach Him . . . Our Lord God is here.”

In similar terms, he counsels: “Would you pray in a temple? Pray in yourself. But first be a temple of God, for He in His temple hears him who prays.” One fact is certain: Augustine’s own prayers are suffused with a sense of the omnipresence of God.

Even so, inward speaking with God is hardly enough. Our deep-seated longings must emerge from the caverns of our heart. “With great earnestness of heart . . we should implore help from God.” In so doing we are greatly encouraged by the fact that He always hears us within “in the omnipresence of His majesty.” Despite all our infirmities, we may be sure of acceptance by “the entrance of [our] prayer into God’s presence” and “the inclination of His ear” towards us “is His compassionate listening to it.”

3. Scriptural Prayer
A further characteristic emphasis is Augustine’s insistence that prayer must be always Scriptural in content, and as much as possible
Scriptural in form. “Learn to fix the eye of faith,” he urges us, “on the word of the divine sacred Scriptures, as on a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in our hearts.” (2 Pet 1.19) It is as we learn to pray Scripturally that God teaches us how to pray.

Although words are unnecessary, either to our holy desires or to God’s knowledge of those desires, to express our spiritual longing in Scriptural words serves both to clarify the content of our desires to ourselves and to keep them flowing down divinely-approved channels. Furthermore, adopting the language of holy desire found in Scripture actually nurtures that desire in our hearts. For Augustine, this process takes place especially, though not exclusively, through our prayerful engagement with the Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer, and through exercising the three prime graces of faith, hope and love.

(a) The Psalms
“The comprehensive mystery underlying all of Scripture,” Augustine asserts, “is Christ and the Church.” “Our whole purpose when we hear the Psalms, the Prophets and the Law is to see Christ there, to understand Christ there.” It is this understanding of the Psalms that made him give them a dual role: first as the words of Christ; then, arising from her union to Him, as the words of His Church. Viewed as the record of the desires of Christ and His Church, the Psalms make available to us an immensely rich deposit of sanctified emotions. “For Augustine, therefore, the Psalter is not only informative but also performative.” (Michael Cameron)

This is the prime reason why we should pray in the language of the Psalms. The same prayers and praises that Christ makes “in the midst of the congregation” (Psa 22.22) we make, as members of His Body. So, he comments: “His voice in the Psalms - a voice singing . . . a voice groaning, a voice rejoicing, a voice sighing . . - we should know this voice thoroughly, feel it intimately, make it our own.”
A second reason is that whatever affection was in the psalmists’ hearts - whether grief for sin, anticipatory joy, hope in God, thankfulness for received mercies, or fear of enemies - is also in our hearts. “If the psalm prays, you pray; if it laments, you lament; if it exults, you rejoice; if it hopes, you hope; if it fears, you fear. Everything written here is a mirror for us.” When, therefore, we pray the language of the Psalms, God graciously changes us into the kind of people He would have us be. For the more we assimilate the content and language of the Psalms, the more we resemble what we read and hear. This in turn brings greater spiritual understanding of their true meaning, thereby contributing to our growth in grace. At the same time, God’s grace enables us to relinquish desire for this world and its goods, while stimulating a longing for Himself such as the psalmists themselves had.

A single example may illustrate his meaning: “Do you wish to be beautiful?” he inquires surprisingly, having in view the penitential Psalms. Then “confess! . . . You were foul; confess, that you may be fair. You were a sinner; confess, that you may be righteous. You could deform yourself: you cannot make yourself beautiful.” The lesson is clear: “We love beauty; let us first choose confession, that beauty may follow.” This is God’s method in training us for heaven.

Furthermore, Augustine himself underwent experiences that could only be expressed in the language of the Psalms. His desires, as expressed in prayer, were too genuine to be falsified by sentimental cliches. It is no surprise, therefore, that his prayers are studded with the language of the Psalms. If we are the people of God, he virtually infers, we too shall pass through similar experiences, which we will identify as we read and sing in the Psalter. This personal appropriation of the Psalms, both prompted and undertaken by God’s grace, cannot help but reshape our whole characters and lives. A further bonus, says Augustine, is the realization that in praying the Psalms we pray in communion with the whole Church and with Christ, whose prayers they are.
(b) The Lord’s Prayer
Augustine regards the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6.9-13; Luke 11.2-4) as the best model for the prayer life of all believers. Indeed, he says, it is so comprehensive that we should be ashamed to ask, much less desire, what is not covered by it. Christian prayer, he advises from its brevity and intensity, should be brief, full of fervour and complemented by good works. Its petitions establish both the direction and boundaries of what we should desire and request. Its praises both draw out our love for our heavenly Father and teach us to treat all other Christians as His children and our brothers and sisters. The entire prayer serves as a staff to lean on throughout our desert pilgrimage to God, for its petitions ask Him for all needed supplies for our journey and its praises point us to one ardently-desired terminus, the blissful enjoyment of our God in eternal glory.

(c) Faith, Hope and Love
“God is to be worshipped with faith, hope and love,” claims Augustine. Again: “In faith, hope and love we are always praying with uninterrupted longing.” Faith in God and His promises, hope for their fulfilment and love to Him who both made and keeps them, are therefore essential ingredients in prayer. All three of these graces are His gift, like the prayer that flows from them. The more we exercise them, the more He strengthens and refines them. “In proportion to the simplicity of our faith, the firmness of our hope and the ardour of our desire” (the first part of love, the second being delight), God will enlarge our hearts so that “we may receive what He prepares to bestow.” So, he exhorts, “Pray in hope, pray in faith, pray in love, pray earnestly and patiently,” and God will give us our heart’s holy desires. (Psa 37.4) The life marked by “these three,” as he often calls them, strains after sight, the beatific vision of God, which it is certain to enjoy at its journey’s end.

Having said this, Augustine always grounds hope and love in faith, the mother grace. This faith, which unites us to God in Christ, is always a faith that bears hope in its bosom and works by love. In this connection,
Augustine’s two favourite texts (in the Latin Vulgate) are Isaiah 6.9 - “Except ye believe, ye shall not understand,” and John 20.29 - “Blessed are they that have not seen, and shall believe.”

Faith, therefore, is the grace that keeps God’s promise of perfect union with Himself in view, and leads the way to that union. Hope maintains our personal expectation of enjoying that union, when we have “ceased hoping in wealth and the other enticements of this world.” Meanwhile, love “glues us to God” until He brings us to our eternal enjoyment of it, where that love will never cease.

Augustine’s constant aiming at congruence between his praying and these Scriptural guides was greatly encouraged by his knowledge that all three are from God, and that His purpose in fusing them in every believer’s pilgrimage shall be fulfilled.

Yet, he acknowledges, the quest involves a divine paradox. On the one hand, Scripture teaches us to yearn for God. On the other, it makes clear that He is far beyond our understanding, so that we hardly know Him. We must therefore pray in a kind of “learned ignorance.”

Still, our ignorance is not total. God has given us some faint knowledge of Himself in order that we may desire Him more. This knowledge, imparted by the Holy Spirit through His Word in Christ, is unquestionably true knowledge, and it stimulates our desire for Him, at the same time satisfying our present needs on our journey towards Him. Meanwhile, we must never forget that at the end of our journey we shall see Him as He is, know Him even as we are known and love Him as we ought.

4. Prayer through Christ
In his Confessions, Augustine prayerfully reflects on his pre-conversion seeking of God: “I sought . . some way to acquire the strength sufficient to enjoy Thee; but I did not find it until I embraced that ‘Mediator
between God and man, the man Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim 2.5), ‘who is over all, God blessed for ever’ (Rom 9.5), who came calling and saying, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’ (John 14.6)” From the time of this heaven-born meeting Augustine felt the need to offer up all his desires to God through Christ as Mediator. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate that, as Mediator, Christ must be both God and man. Though “so remote” by reason of His “divine majesty,” He “deigned to come close to us through human weakness,” so that all his redeeming acts could be accomplished through a human nature actuated by the Divine Person of the Son of God.

Since sin has made such a wide rift between the human race and God, it was necessary that the Mediator should be born, live and die without sin before He could reconcile us to God. Only then, following the shedding of His most precious blood, could He ascend to the Father, and continue His work of mediation from heaven.

So, he says in effect: Look to Christ in glory, interceding with His and our Father on our behalf, and rendering our guilty and polluted souls (and with them our soiled prayers) clean and acceptable in His sight. Look to Him too as the True Light shining on us from heaven with the truth that will surely conduct us safely to our desired haven. Persevere in Christ the Way, and you will soon be at your journey’s end, where “there will be no prayer” or “waiting for promised blessings,” but only contemplation of those blessings “actually bestowed.” Furthermore, you will no longer walk “in the wilderness of the dead, where we now are,” but you shall walk “before the Lord in the land of the living” (Psa 116.9) for you shall appear with Him in glory. (Col 3.3-4)

Augustine’s remarks on the effect of this union to Christ are astonishing. We enjoy, he says, a triple benefit: Christ “prays for us as our Priest; He prays in us as our Head; He is prayed to by us as our God.” The implications of this remarkable conjunction lie beyond the scope of our present study. Suffice to say that it should make us
recognize with deep humility our words to Him, “our words in Him and His words in us.”

5. Self-Discipline in Prayer
Conscious of the daily plague of wandering thoughts and lawless desires, Augustine recommends conscious self-discipline in prayer. The setting aside of stated times is calculated to divert our thoughts from earth-bound activities to heavenly realities. Even certain postures - such as kneeling, lying prostrate and outstretched hands - may help to re-enforce our concentration in prayer. The best help, however, is a godly life. Such a life corresponds to the holy desires within. Integrity and uprightness in all our dealings with God and others will certainly strengthen and deepen our prayers and praises. Forgiving others and aiding the poor are specially recommended in their contribution to having a good conscience when we draw near to God in prayer.

6. Prayer for Temporal Things
For all his emphasis on eternal realities, Augustine was no other-worldly ascetic. He allowed generously for prayer for such temporal things as life, health, marriage, friendship and a competent portion of this world’s goods.

Yet even these are to be desired only as helps to godliness, necessary on our journey to the immediate enjoyment of God. Our happiness, he never tires of stating, consists not in the possession of this world’s good things, but in possessing Him who gives them. The allure of the temporal must never distract us from the pursuit of the eternal. Whatever we ask in Christ’s name will be given only insofar as it answers God’s purpose of grace and glory towards us. It is in wise mercy that He refuses many of our requests.

In short, he says in effect, you ask God for many things - to keep you on your travels, to protect you in your homes, to bless your friendships and your labours, but do you ever ask Him for Himself? This places all our desires in the right perspective.
7. Praise
Consistent with his teaching on petition are Augustine’s thoughts on praise. Its source is our heart’s love for God, infused by God Himself in the form of desire tending to delight. Its medium is prayer, singing and a holy life. Its end is the eternal adoration of God. Since, therefore, all is of God, through God and to God, praise is both the beginning and ending of prayer.

So, he exhorts us: “Praise . . and bless the Lord your God every day, that when single days have passed, and there has come one day without end, you may go from praise to praise.” His praise should spring from our appreciation of His greatness: “His greatness is without end; let your praise also be without end.”

Two aspects in particular of God’s dealings with us are very prominent in Augustine’s motivation for praise: creation and salvation.

“So far . . as His works are known to us,” he says of the former, “let us praise Him through His works.” Again, he says: “Since of His greatness there is no end, and we cannot contain Him, we should praise Him . . . Let us who lack His greatness look to His works . . and by His works praise the Worker; by what He has made praise the Maker; by His creation praise the Creator.”

The Confessions contain some exquisite passages in which Augustine praises God for the beauty of His creation. Elsewhere he notes how the “sweet melody” of the Psalms are chanted by the labourers in the fields: “So men who sing like this - in the harvest, at the grape-picking, in any task that totally absorbs them - . . . soon become filled with such a happiness that they can no longer express it in words, and, leaving aside syllables, strike up a wordless chant of jubilation.”

As for salvation, a particular, representative prayer of his expresses his sense of total indebtedness to God and His grace: “What . . hast
Thou done to us, O Lord, whom we praise, that we should be, that we should praise, that we should exult in Thy righteousness, that we should utter forth the remembrance of Thy sweetness? Let us tell it, and as we tell, let us praise.”

Another fine reference is afforded by his comments on the angelic hymn: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men.’ (Luke 2.14) “In faith, hope and love,” he exhorts, “let us meditate on these divine words, this praise of God, this rejoicing of angels . . We too shall be ‘glory to God in the highest’ when, caught up in the spiritual body, we shall meet Christ in the clouds of heaven.”

For all that, he laments, our praise in this life is extremely sluggish. “Some sweet odour of the praise of God reaches us,” he confesses with sterling honesty, “but for the most part, mortality weighs on us . . If we say Allelujah (ie Praise the Lord) for long, the praise of God becomes a burden to us, through the massy weight of our flesh.” Sometimes, he confesses, “our prayers are so lukewarm, indeed stone-cold, and hardly prayers at all.” They are so far away from our thoughts, even while ‘praying,’ that we do not even notice the fact with pain. If we did, “we would be praying again.” As R.A.Markus observes, for Augustine all Christians are undergoing “a life-long process of convalescence.” Their prayers and praises, therefore, will always be sluggish until they recover their full health in heaven.

Nevertheless, even our striving against reluctant flesh, the remains of indwelling sin, should not discourage us: “Do not think that you faint in praising Him. Your praise of Him is like food: the more you praise Him, the more you acquire strength, and He whom you praise becomes the sweeter.”

However, striving against opposition will not always be our lot: “after this world . . there will be a fulness without ceasing in Allelujah.” In keeping with the whole bent of his life after conversion, Augustine
comforts struggling saints with the assurance: “Allelujah is praise of God. To us as we labour it signifies the activity of our rest. For when after those labours we come to that rest, the praise of God will be our sole occupation - our activity there is Allelujah.” Again: “There our food will be Allelujah, our drink will be Allelujah, the activity of our rest will be Allelujah, our whole joy will be Allelujah; that is, the praise of God.” Praise that belongs to the unimpeded enjoyment of God is reserved for us in heaven. And the cause of this endless praise is love springing from the Beatific Vision: “Those who perfectly praise Him, do so because they perfectly love Him, and they perfectly love Him because they see Him face to face.”

Meanwhile, the recurring note of longing modifies, even dulls, our praise: “Do we not long for the heavenly Jerusalem?” he asks wearily, “and the more impatiently we long for it, do we not the more patiently suffer all things for its sake?”

Augustine in Prayer

When we turn more fully to Augustine’s own prayers, we find him consistently exemplifying his own teaching. There are no rigid demarcation lines between petition and praise; they mingle and flow in and out of each other with ease, as his desires ebb and flow. We may identify specific cries to God for mercy, for salvation, for keeping, for deliverance, for purging, for enlargement of heart, for the speaking and hearing presence of God, both for himself and others. We may also find him praising, blessing, thanking and silently adoring his God as different forms of praise. Yet all these varied forms, like the beautiful forms he observed so appreciatively in the world around him, are simply eruptions, like volcanic lava, from his burning heart within.

We observe, too, his humble acknowledgment of total dependence for every mercy on the Father’s sovereign good pleasure, the Son’s
mediation and merits, and the Spirit’s activating, enabling and co-operating grace. His prayers are thoroughly Trinitarian.

Again, we note the length of some of his prayers, spreading like tentacles from an initial seed-thought. Others are marked by a crisp yet full conciseness that fixes them firmly in the reader’s memory.

As we tread softly on the holy ground he occupies in communion with his God, let us seek grace from the same Lord to make his prayers, and especially the holy desires from which they flowed, our own. This is not plagiarism, but assimilation, and by God’s blessing has transforming power. For convenience and clarity, we shall use the foregoing categories in this section.

1. Prayer as Holy Desire
At the very portal of prayer, Augustine consecrates himself to God and begs from Him a heart suited to its exercise: “ ‘I will praise Thee, O Lord, with my whole heart.’ (Psa 9.1) I lay my whole heart on the altar of Thy praise, I offer Thee a holocaust of praise . . . Let the flame of Thy love set on fire my whole heart . . . May I wholly burn towards Thee, be wholly on fire towards Thee, wholly love Thee.”

The same ardent desires pulse through the opening of his Confessions: “Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite.’ (Psa 145.3; 147.5) And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, who bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resistest the proud: yet man would praise Thee; he, but a particle of Thy creation. Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in Thee.”

Again, he begs: “O Lord my God, hear my prayer, and let Thy mercy attend my longing.” And again: “O Lord, hear and pity! O Lord my God, light of the blind, strength of the weak - and also light of the seeing and
strength of the strong - hearken to my soul and hear it crying from the depths. Unless Thine ears attend us even in the depths, where should we go? To whom should we cry?” Here is longing springing from the most acute distress and sense of need.

From the outset of his spiritual journey, he kept his longing eyes on its final destination: “When I shall cleave to Thee with my whole heart, I shall nowhere have sorrow or labour, and my life shall wholly live, as wholly full of Thee.” Until that blessed day arrives, he is found time and time again begging God to stir up the grace within him. Sometimes his language startles by its abruptness: “Up, Lord, and do; stir us up, and recall us; kindle and draw us; inflame, grow sweet to us; now let us love, let us run.” At other times, he couches his desires in gentler language: “My knowledge and ignorance are in Thy sight; where Thou hast opened to me, receive me as I enter; where Thou hast closed, open to my knocking.” At all times he is keenly conscious of the awesome, all-powerful, sovereign presence of God: “A closed heart does not close Thine eye, nor can a hard heart thrust back Thy hand, for Thou dost dissolve it at will, in pity or in vengeance.”

2. Prayer from Within
No sooner has Augustine launched into his Confessions, praising God and denigrating himself, than he anxiously poses the question: “And how shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord, since, when I call for Him, I shall be calling Him to myself? And what room is there within me, where my God can come into me? Where can God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? Is there indeed, O Lord my God, anything in me that can contain Thee?” And so he cries out: “Oh, that Thou wouldest enter into my heart, and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace Thee, my sole Good! . . . Narrow is the mansion of my soul; enlarge it, that Thou mayest enter in. It is ruinous; repair it.” Only by a gracious entrance will he be sure that God is his: “Oh, for Thy mercies’ sake, tell me, O
Lord my God, what Thou art to me. ‘Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation.’ (Psa 35.3) So speak, that I may hear. Behold, Lord, my heart is before Thee; open its ears, and say unto my soul, I am thy salvation!”

Later on, he upbraids himself for not seeking God from within as he sought Him in creatures outside himself, boiling in the cauldron of unholy loves in which he had drowned himself as a young man: “Too late I loved Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new. Too late I loved Thee. And behold, Thou wast within, and I abroad, and there I searched for Thee, deformed I, plunging among those fair forms which Thou hadst made.”

Again he pleads: “Let me know Thee, O Lord, who knowest me; let me know Thee as I am known. Power of my soul, enter into it, and fit it for Thee, that Thou mayest have and hold it without spot or wrinkle.” Recalling God’s answer to such pleas, he confesses in the most vivid imagery: “Thou didst call, and shout, and burst my deafness. Thou didst flash, and shine, and scatter my blindness. Thou didst breathe odours, and I drew in breath and panted for Thee . . Thou didst touch me, and I burned for Thy peace.”

And so, in a prayer of rare spiritual and literary beauty, he mingles humble self-condemnation with praise to the God of all grace: “Who am I, and what am I? What evil have not been either my deeds; or if not my deeds, my words; or if not my words, my will? But Thou, O Lord, art good and merciful, and Thy right hand had respect to the depth of my death, and from the bottom of my heart emptied that abyss of corruption.”

In similar vein is a prayer in which he reflects poignantly on God’s watchful care over his past life of sin: “I sighed, and Thou didst hear me; I wavered, and Thou didst guide me; I wandered through the broad way of the world, and Thou didst not forsake me.”
3. Scriptural Prayer

Augustine’s great reverence for Holy Scripture is evident from a request he made to God when seeking to unfold its meaning to himself and others: “Let me not be deceived in Thy Scriptures, nor let me deceive out of them.” As he studied them, he became over-awed by their contents: “Wondrous depth of Thy words! whose surface, behold, is before us, inviting to little ones; yet are they a wondrous depth, O my God, a wondrous depth! It is awesome to look into them: an awesomeness of honour and a trembling of love!” And so, he confesses: “I have believed Thy Books, and their words are most full of mystery!” His assimilation of some of these depths finds expression in many of his prayers.

(a) The Psalms

Augustine first discovered the spiritual beauty of the Psalms in the cathedral at Milan, where he attended the services of its bishop, Ambrose. The impact they made on his sensitive soul is recorded with a sense of wonder: “How did I weep, in Thy Hymns and Songs, touched to the quick by the voices of Thy sweetly-attuned Church! The voices flowed into my ears, and the Truth distilled into my heart, out of which the affections of my devotion overflowed, and tears ran down . . . and I was happy.” Before long, he had turned the people’s praises into his own prayers: “Oh, with what accents did I speak to Thee in those Psalms, and how was I kindled towards Thee by them, and on fire to rehearse them before the whole world.”

Thereafter, prayer upon prayer grew out of a single verse or phrase of the Psalms. “‘What shall I render unto the Lord?’ (Psa 116.12) he inquires, for delivering him from bondage to fleshly lusts. “I will love Thee, O Lord, and thank Thee, and confess to Thy name, because Thou hast put away from me such wicked and evil deeds. To Thy grace I ascribe it, and to Thy mercy, that Thou hast melted away my sin as if it were ice. To Thy grace also I ascribe whatever of evil I did not commit - for what might I not have done, loving sin as I did, just for the sake of sinning?” Let one more example suffice: “It is a good thing to say,
'Have mercy on me, heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee,” (Psa 41.4), and not to abuse Thy mercy for a license to sin.”

(b) The Lord’s Prayer
Augustine prayed the Lord’s Prayer whenever he and his congregation worshipped in the basilica at Hippo Regius, for it was included in the liturgy. The fact that it “deals with the motives and affections of the inner man” (David Schaff) greatly endeared it to him. Yet during his exposition of it, both in the Sermon on the Mount and in Faith, Hope and Love, his meditations on it never press from him even an ejaculatory prayer. However, his customary paraphrasing of Biblical texts does draw from him one prayer from the petition, ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.’ “Just as Thy will is in the angels who are in heaven, so that they wholly cleave to Thee, and thoroughly enjoy Thee, no error beclouding their wisdom, no misery hindering their blessedness; so let it be done in Thy saints who are on earth, and made from the earth . . and . . are yet to be taken from the earth.” This is hardly an exposition of the petition, but how characteristic it is!

(c) Faith, Hope and Love
One of Augustine’s pithy sayings is: “Faith believes; hope and love pray.” Immediately he corrects himself: “But without faith, the last two cannot exist, and therefore we may say that faith also prays.” All three graces lie beneath so many of his recorded prayers.

(i) Faith
Since “faith obtains through prayer that which the law commands,” we find Augustine pleading with God in accents of real trust. “Give what Thou dost command, and command what Thou wilt.” This was his acknowledgment of our dependence on grace that so angered Pelagius. In another prayer, he reveals his trusting devotion to God: “O Lord my God, . . . give me what I in turn may offer back to Thee.” A little later, he trusts God to speak to him through His Word, telling Him: “Behold, Thy voice is my joy.”
(ii) Hope
Similarly, his longing desires for God are constantly being fed by hope: “Let me know Thee, O my Knower; let me know Thee even as I am known. O Strength of my soul, enter it and prepare it for Thyself, that Thou mayest have and hold it without spot or blemish. This is my hope; therefore have I spoken; and in this hope I rejoice whenever I rejoice aright.”

A little later he prays: “Though in Thy sight I despise myself and count myself but dust and ashes - even I know something about Thee . . . that ‘now we see through a glass darkly,’ not yet ‘face to face.’ (1 Cor 13.12) . . . But there is hope, because Thou art faithful and wilt not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to resist . . . and what I do not know about myself, I will continue not to know until the time when my ‘darkness is as the noonday’ in Thy sight. (Isa 58.10)”

(iii) Love
Without fear of contradiction, love is the over-mastering motivation in Augustine’s prayers. So he confesses: “Thou hast struck my heart with Thy Word, and I have loved Thee.” Again, asking himself in God’s presence why he is confessing all his sins and God’s goodness to himself: “For love of Thy love I do it.” And again: “that through them [his confessions] I may stir up my own love and the love of my readers toward Thee, so that all may say, ‘Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised.’” And again: “There is a joy not given to the ungodly, but to those who love Thee for Thine own sake, whose joy Thou Thyself art.”

4. Prayer through Christ
One of Augustine’s most striking prayers reveals something of his profound sense of indebtedness to God for the Saviour and His infinitely meritorious atonement: “How hast Thou loved us, good Father, who didst not spare Thine only Son, but delivered Him up for us ungodly . . . for us to Thee both Victor and Victim, and therefore Victor because Victim!”
It is as Victor that he envisages Christ ever living to intercede for all those who come to God by Him. In a most moving prayer for light on his reading of Holy Scripture, he says: “See, O Father, look and see . . . Let it be pleasing in Thy mercy’s sight that I should find favour with Thee, that the secret things of Thy Word may be opened to me when I knock. I beg this of Thee by our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, the Man of Thy right hand, the Son of Man, whom Thou madest strong for Thy purpose as Mediator between Thee and us; through whom Thou didst seek us when we were not seeking Thee, but didst seek us so that we might seek Thee; Thy Word, through whom Thou madest all things, and me among them; Thine only Son, through whom Thou hast called Thy faithful people to adoption, and me among them. I beseech it of Thee through Him who sitteth at Thy right hand and maketh intercession for us, ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’”

5. Self-Discipline in Prayer
Augustine’s prayers reveal nothing of the physical posture in which he made them. We may only surmise that, as in all other spheres, he practiced what he preached.

We do, however, find some lengthy, undisciplined prayers in the Confessions themselves; prayers in which one seed-thought grows imperceptibly into luxuriant branches that ‘hang over the wall.’ Speaking of these, Augustine confesses his “lack of self-control,” guilelessly adding that he “derived some sweetness” from their length. After all, he is communing with his God. What he says of his past life is equally applicable to some of his prayers: “If only there had been some-one to regulate my disorder!” For example, he complains at length to God of his dislike of Greek literature, bemoans his pride on winning a school rhetoric competition, and takes three chapters to explain how he stole pears just for the sake of stealing!

All this, and much more he reveals, not to inform God of what He does not already know, but to glorify God in his gradual and painful
extrication from the chains of wilful sin. Indeed, one disarmingly childlike confession begins: “Now, I would like to discuss a little further, in Thy presence, O my God, . . . etc.”

More frequent are those concise but comprehensive prayers that shoot up instantaneously out of his heart, like the prayer of Hezekiah when bearing the cup before his king. His writings teem with them. Strictly speaking, they are not the fruit of conscious self-discipline, but the product of a highly-skilled orator whose native and acquired gifts are now offered in prayer to his divine Master.

The following are among the most striking:
“I could not be at all, O my God, were Thou not in me.”
“Too little does he love Thee, who loves anything with Thee, which he loves not for Thee.”
“O eternal Truth, and true Love, and lovely Eternity, Thou art my God; to Thee do I sigh day and night.”
“O Lord, grant us peace . . the peace of rest, the peace of the Sabbath that has no evening.”
“How deep are Thy ways, O God, Thou only great, who dost sit silently on high, and by an unwearied law dost dispense penal blindness to lawless desires.”
“In lustful desire is the true distance from Thy face.”
“What is nearer Thine ears than a confessing heart and a life of faith?”
“What am I to myself without Thee but a guide to my own downfall?”
“The godless flee from Thee, that they might not see Thee seeing them.”
“How shall we obtain salvation except from Thy hand, re-making what it made?”
“Behold my heart, O my God, behold my heart, on which Thou hast had pity in the bottom of the bottomless pit.”
“My one hope is Thy wonderful great mercy.”
“Deliver us who call on Thee now; deliver too those who do not call on Thee yet, that they may call on Thee, and Thou mayest deliver them.”
“Thou, O Lord, dost bless the godly; but first Thou dost justify him when ungodly.”
“Thou knowest my unskilfulness and infirmities; teach me and heal me.”
“What is like Thy Word, our Lord, who endures in Himself without becoming old, and makes all things new?”

6. Prayer for Temporal Things
We have no extant prayers for temporal things, since Augustine, uniquely in a diocesan bishop, lived in a community that held all things in common. Consequently he made no will, because he had nothing to leave to others.

7. Praise
Augustine left no paean to God like his spiritual father Ambrose, to whom under God we owe the Te Deum:

“We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship Thee, the Father everlasting . . .”

Also, the subdued quality of most of his praises is fully in keeping with his awareness both of the immense distance between God and himself and of his not having yet attained heaven. Accordingly, unrestrained jubilation appears in his prayers more in anticipation than in actual experience.

Nevertheless, he gladly acknowledges that even his poor praises spring from God’s mercy: “My lips would not praise Thee, unless Thy mercy were to go before me. By Thy gift I praise Thee, through Thy mercy I praise Thee.” And again: “So I will speak good of Thee in my life. What is ‘so’? That I may ascribe my life when I praise Thee, to Thy mercy, not to my merits.” Such praises lie at the very heart of this childlike yet profound ‘doctor of grace.’
Perhaps the following two prayers may form a fitting conclusion to our study:

The first encapsulates Augustine’s whole approach to the awesome experience of drawing near to God: “Our Father, who hast exhorted us to pray . . hear me as I tremble in this darkness, and reach out Thy right hand to me. Hold Thy light before me, and recall me from my wanderings, that with Thee as my Guide, I may return to myself and Thee.”

The second is the well-known and beautiful prayer that epitomizes his entire spiritual life: “Thou, who art the light of the minds that know Thee, the life of the souls that love Thee, and the strength of the wills that serve Thee, help us so to know Thee that we may truly love Thee, so to love Thee that we may fully serve Thee, whom to serve is perfect freedom.”

May God teach us all to pray as Augustine prayed.
Sovereign Grace Union

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