

Augustine of Hippo



Augustine raised his arm slowly in order not to frighten the birds roosting on the branch far above his head. Then he slid a stone into the leather band of his catapult, pulled back the cat gut and 'ping'. It flew through the branches and straight for the cluster of birds. There was a dull thud as one landed a short distance away. 'Gotcha!' said the boy. 'You'll roast nicely. Now let's see if we can find where the rest of your family moved to.'

Silently he slid among the undergrowth, taking care not to stand on any brittle twigs that might break and give him away. 'There they are!' he said to himself, seeing birds' shadows cast on to the ground by the bright North African sun. 'I'll try for a double,' he decided. From his leather pouch he took a little pile of stones, looking for two that would fit together in his catapult. They needed to be rounded on one side but flat on the other, and about the same size and

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weight. 'Perfect!' he whispered. 'These ones are ideal.' Again there was absolute silence until the 'ping,' but this time it was followed by two dull thuds.

Augustine unwound a length of thin creeper from the tree the birds had been on, broke it off, and used it to tie together the legs of his three birds. 'Dad can have these two,' he thought. 'That should put him in a good mood.'

'It's me, Mum!' Augustine called as he neared home. There was silence. Dropping his birds on the floor, he went in quietly. It took a minute for his eyes to get used to the darkness after the brilliant sun. Seeing his mother on her knees didn't take him by surprise. Monica was a Christian, and when she wasn't doing all the work of an African mother she was on her knees praying. Augustine listened, 'Lord, please forgive my child his sins. Please save his soul and use him to tell others about yourself,' she said.

'She's praying for me again as usual,' he thought, creeping back out into the sunlight. 'Maybe I'll become a Christian one day, but I'm too busy enjoying myself to be bothered just now. I wish Mum would stop asking God to convert me until I'm grown-up. It would be so easy to become a believer just to please

her, but I want to please myself while I'm young.'

'I had a visit from a member of the Guard today, son,' Monica told her young son, when she joined him outside. 'There's been trouble and they wondered if you were involved.'

Augustine looked at her. 'What am I meant to have done?' he asked, laughing just a little nervously. 'Because I didn't do it and I wasn't there when I did it.'

His mother looked serious. 'Augustine,' she said, 'I know you weren't involved because you were with me when the theft took place. But I also know that you don't always keep good company and you do get into scrapes.'

Augustine hung his head, but just for a minute. 'I'm young, Mum,' he said. 'I'll not do anything so stupid that the Roman Guard will come for me. And I promise I will think about becoming a Christian ... sometime.'

'Sometime may not be soon enough,' his mother warned. 'Not everyone lives to grow up.'

A shiver went down the young boy's spine. 'But I will,' he said, defiantly.

'I'm not feeling well,' Augustine whined one day, not so long afterwards.

'What's wrong?' his mother asked. 'Are you feeling sick?' Before he could reply, he

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was caught in a spasm of pain. He was bent double with the force of it, and it was some minutes before he could speak. 'It's my stomach, Mum,' he said. 'I've got a terribly sore stomach.'

Monica felt his forehead. He was hot and beads of perspiration were forming as she watched. Another spasm of pain hit him and he landed on the floor. Within the hour he was tossing and turning. One minute he was roasting and the next he was shivering with cold. His mother washed him to bring his temperature down and gave him sips of water to drink.

'He's in a bad way,' said Patricius, Augustine's father. 'I've made an offering to the gods for him but maybe you should be praying to your God too.'

'I've been praying to the Lord God for him since before he was born,' Monica said, 'and I've never stopped praying all of today.'

'I don't understand you Christians,' said Patricius. 'How do you expect your God to answer prayers unless you give him animal sacrifices?'

'Mother,' Augustine said weakly. 'I think I'm going to die.'

Monica looked at him, and stroked his hand gently. 'Is he dying?' she wondered. 'He's not eaten for days and he's lost so much weight. He's just skin and bone.'

'Please, Mother,' he said, through tears. 'Please get the priest quickly. I want to go to heaven when I die.'

His mother kissed him, her tears mixing with his. 'I'll get the priest,' she said. But when she came back, not knowing whether her young son would be alive or dead, she discovered that he had made an amazing recovery! He was sitting up eating a piece of mango.

'Praise the Lord!' said the delighted Monica. 'Praise the Lord!'

'I don't think I'm going to die quite yet!' Augustine grinned.

Augustine loved his mother, but despite all that she had taught him he grew up without becoming a Christian. And as if that wasn't bad enough, he went on to live an immoral life. Monica must have been deeply upset, but she kept on praying. Although she was proud of her son's able mind, and that he became a professor across the Mediterranean Sea in Italy, all she really wanted for him was that he should become a Christian. Patricius, who followed Roman gods and was not a Christian, didn't bother about his son's behaviour as that was how people lived in the Roman Empire.

One day in 386, when Augustine was 32 years old, he was walking along a road in the

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Italian city of Milan. He passed a beggar who was sitting on the pavement laughing. 'How can that man laugh?' he asked himself. 'He's sitting there on the street, owning nothing but the clothes he's wearing, and not even sure if he'll have a meal today, and he's happy. The man is laughing!' Augustine walked on. 'And here I am,' he thought. 'I've got a good job, another pretty girl, plenty of money, fine clothes and as much to eat as I want.' He stopped and looked back at the happy beggar. 'And I'm miserable,' he admitted. 'He's happy with nothing and I'm miserable with everything. What a mess!'

'Would you like to come to church with me?' a friend asked him.

Augustine almost automatically said that he'd rather not, when he remembered the beggar. 'Yes, I'll come,' he said. 'I hear that Ambrose is a good preacher.'

'You can judge for yourself,' his friend commented. Monica, who had moved to Milan soon after her son, heard he was going to church and she prayed, how she prayed!

'He's a good preacher right enough,' Augustine said, as he and his friend left the church. 'I'm going to have to think about what he said.'

For some time he did just that. He wept over it too. 'I just can't take it in,' he told

Monica, one day. 'My sins are so terrible, how can God love me? How can Jesus have died for me after all that I've done?'

'Jesus died for us because we're sinners,' his mother explained. 'He wouldn't have needed to die if we'd been perfect. His blood was shed on the cross for you and for me, and because of that our sins can be washed away.'

Soon afterwards Augustine was in his garden with a friend. He left his companion sitting under a tree and walked about restlessly. He was in a terrible mental muddle. 'Take it up and read it; take it up and read it,' he heard what sounded like a child's voice saying. 'Is that a nursery rhyme?' he wondered, but couldn't remember any with those words. Suddenly he realised it was God speaking to him. He rushed back to his friend who had the Bible book of Romans. Opening it up, Augustine read words that told him he should look to Jesus and not live the immoral life he was living. Augustine suddenly knew the truth, confessed his sin and believed in Jesus. When he and his friend went back into the house, Monica learned that all her prayers had been answered.

Augustine became a great student of the Bible and teacher of the Christian faith.

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Just eight years after he was converted he was appointed Bishop of Hippo, the second most important town in North Africa. 'I'm happier now than I've ever been,' he told one of his friends. 'And it's all thanks to that happy beggar who made me realise how miserable I really was, and to my mother's prayers.'

'There is so much odd teaching,' his friend told him. 'Some people say that the Roman Empire fell because they stopped worshipping their gods. Others say that we go to heaven by living decent lives rather than by having faith in God. And there's a man called Pelagius who's teaching that we can be good, our only problem is that we choose not to be.'

'There are more strange teachers around as well,' said a priest who was with them. 'Have you heard of the Donatists?'

Augustine nodded. 'They've got some very funny ideas. They say that the church should be full of people who are absolutely good, that nobody who isn't as good as they are should be allowed in!'

'There's no hope for me then,' his friend said. 'I know myself well enough to know I don't belong in their kind of church.'

'We've got to get things sorted out,' the Bishop announced. 'Or nobody will know what Christians believe. They'll think Christianity

is a religion that you can make up yourself - just believe in Jesus and add whatever you like to his life story.'

'I think God gave you such an amazing brain in order that you could think things through for us all,' Augustine's friend said. 'We're in such a terrible muddle.'

'With God's help I'll do what I can. And you,' he told his companion, 'must pray that I'll know the truth when I see it in the Bible and not accept one single teaching that is not in God's word.'

'I hear that the Bishop's book is nearly ready,' was the news around Hippo in the year 400. Ten years later, the news was much the same. 'I hear that Augustine has written another book,' people said to each other. 'What a mind that man's got!' And the second book was not the last thing he wrote. The Bishop of Hippo spent much of his time studying wrong teachings, then searching the Bible to find out what was true.

'Augustine helped me straighten out my thinking,' a Christian said to his two companions, as they walked through the streets of Hippo in 421. 'After the evils of the Roman Empire I'd been trying so hard to get my congregation to lead good lives that I was almost teaching the same things as Pelagius. How wrong I was to go that far! Of course God expects us to live

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decent lives, but we don't get to heaven by being decent. We are saved only by faith in Jesus. It doesn't matter how hard we try to be good, we can't be because we are sinners. I have to admit my teaching was not from the Bible. But now the Bishop has sorted me out.'

'And at last I've got an answer for the Donatists,' added their companion. 'Of course we shouldn't try to keep sinners from coming to church. After all, Jesus taught that weeds would grow among the crops till harvest time. That's what it's like in the church. There will always be non-Christians who come, and thank God for that because they might be converted. I'm grateful to the Bishop for making that clear.'

'We all owe a lot to Augustine, even the Romans,' the priest said. 'They thought it was because they'd stopped worshipping their gods that the Empire fell but Augustine was able to show from the Bible that it was God's judgement, not their gods going in the huff! Maybe now some of them will come to believe in Jesus.'

'Wouldn't that be wonderful!' one of his friends smiled. 'That really would be good news.'

As they walked on the priest seemed deep in thought. 'What's on your mind?' he was asked.

'I was just thinking how much Augustine has done for the Church. We were all in such a muddle until he came along. We didn't know the Bible and we didn't understand much of what we did know! I think the Church will remember Augustine hundreds of years from now, perhaps even thousands, because he's set us out on the right road.' 'You may be right,' laughed his friend. 'But we won't be here to see it!'



Fact File: *Mediterranean Sea.*

The Mediterranean Sea lies between Europe and Africa. It is linked to the open ocean only by the narrow Strait of Gibraltar. It is more than 3,200 kilometres long and covers an area ten times the size of the United Kingdom.



Keynote: When he was young Augustine and his friends often got into trouble. His mother realised that these friends were a bad influence on him. It is important to choose friends wisely. Ask God to help you make friends with people who trust and honour him. If your friends do not believe in Jesus pray that God will help you to tell them about him and his love.



Think: Augustine's life before he became a Christian was immoral. He didn't follow God's rules. Look up Exodus chapter 20. Augustine wanted to disobey God's commands as he thought this was more fun. But it was when Jesus came into his life that Augustine's heart changed. What parts of your life

need to change? Have you asked Jesus to take control of your life?



Prayer: Dear God, please help me to honour you in my life. Protect me from sin. I am sorry for the times that I displease you but thank you for loving me and forgiving me. Amen.