

A central theme of Augustine's *Confessions* is alienation. The soul that has lost God has lost its roots and therefore has lost itself. The soul is inherently unstable on its own, vulnerable, susceptible to the tumult of conflicting desires. It is rendered insensitive to the spiritual dimensions of life. The disordered soul becomes, in Augustine's words, *tired of living, scared of dying*.

The soul's unsatisfied hunger for life blooms into insatiable desire. The desires we freely pursue to sate our hunger morph into self-defeating habits, unbreakable shackles. The self-centered, grasping self, is limited in the harm it can do, not by a moral compass but by the limits of its power.

According to Augustine we never lose the image of God stamped on us in creation, damaged and marred though it be. This means, in the words of Paul, *What we desire, this we do not do; instead, what we hate, this we do*. The divided self is drawn in a dozen different directions with traumatic and paralyzing effect. Even our best actions have some intermingling of self-interest which lies beyond our power to eradicate.

I invite you to hear Augustine in his own words:

How my heart cried out in distress, my God,
like a woman in labor,
But unknown to me you were there.
You were listening.
As my earnest search went on in silence,
those secret sighs of my heart became loud cries
calling on your mercy.

You, Lord, knew my pain.
No one else knew.
How little of it I could put into words
to tell even my closest friends!
How little the tumult within me they picked up!
How could their ears have caught anything
of the turmoil within me,
when I hadn't the words or the time to tell them?

The light was not outside,
but I was looking at things that were outside.
And in those things I could find no place to rest.
They offered me no haven
where I could be satisfied and content,
where I could say, "This is enough. Now all is well."

The happy mean, the middle way,
to my soul's salvation is this:

to protect your image in me,
to serve you,
and to keep my body subject to me.

But when I rebelled against you in my pride,
then these inferior things became my masters
and pinned me down.
There was no respite or relief in any place.

When I tried to think, and to escape from them,
they blocked my way
and prevented me from turning back, as if to say,
“Where do you think you are going, you miserable wretch?”
All of this had sprung from my wounded condition,
for you humble and put down the one who is proud.
It was as if my cheeks, puffed out with pride,
got in the way of my seeing.

Augustine’s cheeks are so puffed with pride his eyes are forced closed: his pride blinds him.

Paul exhorts us to have the same attitude in ourselves which was in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but humbled himself . . . (Philippians 2:5ff)

Adam, the first human, not satisfied with being human, attempted to become something more than human, to become like God, and became less than truly human. Pride is at heart a failure to accept our creatureliness gratefully and gracefully. Jesus, though in the form of God, did not hold on to godlikeness but humbled himself to free humanity into its true glory.

You may have heard it said *He is a very humble person; he has a lot to be humble about.* But that is true of all of us in a sense. *Humus* is the Latin word for earth; it is also the root word for human. Humility is derived from the same word.

From dust, from the *humus*, we come, to dust, to the *humus*, we shall return. This is the truth but not the whole truth. To be fully human is to grow into the knowledge that we are because God is. And we are what we are because God is what God is. God is eternally, necessarily, unchangingly, the infinity of love.

For Augustine, humility means loving the truth more than oneself. To be fully human is to be rooted and grounded in the truth of God’s infinite love, the only reality that satiates the hunger of our souls.