Augustine of Hippo
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As you read this book, you can follow Augustine’s travels on this map.
During Augustine’s life, the Roman Empire ruled most of what are now Europe and the Middle East. It was divided into two parts: the Western Roman Empire (with Rome as its capital) and the Eastern Roman Empire (with Constantinople as its capital). Augustine lived in the Western Roman Empire.

Augustine was born on November 13, 354 A.D. His full name was Aurelius Augustinus. We call him Augustine of Hippo because he spent most of his life in the city of Hippo Regius, in North Africa. He is still considered one of the greatest thinkers who ever lived. Even people who are not Christians admire the way in which he explained things that cannot be seen and touched, like faith, God’s grace, and love.

No one knows what Augustine looked like. The earliest portrait that we still have today was done about two hundred years after his death. As you see in this book, artists imagined Augustine in their own special way.
Augustine’s birthplace was a small town in Northern Africa named Thagaste. Today, the whole region around Thagaste is called Algeria. It was a very green area, full of farms, and olive and wheat fields. Augustine grew up like many children in the Roman Empire. The books he studied were mostly written in Latin, which was the language spoken in ancient Rome.

Fields in Algeria, similar to those Augustine would have seen as a child
After Jesus’ resurrection, Christians were often persecuted and killed by the Roman government. All that changed about forty years before Augustine’s birth, when Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal religion. Then, Christians actually received so many privileges that other people did not have, that many said they were Christians even if they really did not believe. Augustine’s father, Patricius, did not believe in Jesus, but his mother, Monica, did, and taught her children to do the same.

Augustine studied in Thagaste and in a nearby city until the age of sixteen. Because he was very smart, his father decided to send him to Carthage, the largest city in that region, to study law and the art of giving speeches.
Augustine stole pears from a neighbor.
Speaking well in public was a very respected skill in those days. Anyone who wanted to have an important job in society as a politician, teacher, lawyer, or church leader, had to learn how to speak clearly and to convince others that what he said was true. Patricius knew that if his son could speak well he could make a good career in this world. Being a small government officer in Thagaste, Patricius did not have enough money to send his son to Carthage right away, so Augustine had to spend about a year at home.

As a teenager with nothing better to do, Augustine spent a lot of time with a group of naughty friends, looking for fun and playing all kinds of pranks. One night, they went into a neighbor’s field and stole a bunch of pears from his tree. They ate a few and, since they really did not care about the pears, gave the rest to the pigs. Later, Augustine looked back at this time of his life. He was surprised as he realized that he had stolen those pears just for the pleasure of stealing. This showed him how much we all, left to ourselves, tend to sin.
Some ruins of ancient Carthage
Finally, a friend of Augustine’s father helped the young teenager move to Carthage to continue his studies. Carthage was busy, full of life, and very different from the small town of Thagaste. Many students, caught in the excitement of the big city, were rowdy and unruly.

Augustine had many friends, even if he did not like everything they did. He was a very good student and an excellent speaker. As a student, he read many books written by a famous Roman speaker named Cicero. One of Cicero’s books in particular gave him a great desire to know the true meaning of wisdom.
Augustine had been raised as a Christian, but did not know the Bible well. The Latin translation of the Bible at that time was not very good, and Augustine found it different from the fancy, well-written textbooks he used to study. He also did not understand many of the Old Testament stories, which he found hard to believe. Disappointed, he put the Bible aside.

At that same time, he found a group of people who called themselves Manichees. They claimed to be Christians, but taught many things which are not in the Bible. Augustine liked them because they spoke very well.

Monica, Augustine’s mother, was very sad about her son’s choice, and prayed every day that he would have faith in the true God. Once she had a dream where she was standing on a big wooden ruler, crying, and a young man told her not to worry, because Augustine was standing on the same ruler too. “He will be where you are,” the young man said.
Monica’s dream
Encouraged, Monica told her son that the dream meant that he would become a Christian like her. Augustine was not sure. “Maybe you will become a Manichee like me!” Monica stood her ground. “The man in my dream said that you will be where I am, not that I will be where you are,” she explained. Augustine was impressed by those words more than by the dream itself. This great speaker, able to win the toughest debates, was now silenced by his mother’s wisdom and conviction. For many years, he thought carefully about Monica’s reply.

Augustine and his mother Monica

*Painting by Ezio Polliani, Chiesa dell’Eremo, Leceto (SI), Italy*
Without losing hope, Monica kept praying and crying to God for her son. Once she talked to a priest who had also been a Manichee. “Augustine will eventually find out how wrong they are,” he told her. Because Monica kept crying and asking him to talk to her son, he added, “The son of a mother who sheds so many tears for him cannot perish.”

As soon as Augustine finished his studies, he went back to Thagaste to teach others how to give good speeches. He had many friends who shared his beliefs and liked to do the same things. One day, his very best friend got very sick with a high fever and became unconscious. It seemed that he was going to die, so his family baptized him, hoping that it could make some difference.

Surprisingly, his friend got better. When he opened his eyes, Augustine told him what happened, “When you were unconscious, they baptized you!” He thought it was very funny, because his friend was a Manichee, and Manichees made fun of the church and the sacraments.
Augustine’s friend told Augustine to stop teaching him all that Manichean nonsense.
He expected his friend to laugh or to get angry with those who had baptized him. Instead, his friend got angry with Augustine and told him that if he wanted to stay his friend, he would have to stop teaching him all that Manichean nonsense. Augustine was shocked. He had always thought that baptism was just an empty ceremony. Looking back at this experience many years later, he realized that baptism is instead God’s mark of His work in our souls.

Augustine waited a while. He thought that his friend would start following the Manichees again, but his friend got sick again and died. This plunged Augustine into deep sorrow. Losing such a close friend meant losing an important part of his life. He could not find any joy because everything reminded him of his friend. “I hated all places because he was not in them, because they could not say to me, ‘Look, he is coming,’” Augustine wrote.
Augustine left for Italy while his mother was praying.
CHAPTER THREE

Italy

To get away from his sad memories, Augustine returned to Carthage where he became a respected and well-known teacher. His students, however, were very unruly, so he became frustrated. Some friends told him that he could have a better career in Rome, where students were more polite. Augustine decided to take their advice. His father, who had finally become a Christian, had already died, so Monica wanted to go with Augustine. However, Augustine did not want to take his mother along. He told her to wait for him inside a little church by the port, while he stayed with a friend who was waiting for favorable winds to sail. But there was no friend waiting. It was just a cruel lie. While his mother was praying, Augustine left for Rome, leaving her behind.
The Roman Forum, an important part of the city where people gathered for justice and for discussions, as it looks today. Augustine probably taught and spoke there.
In Rome, Augustine was not happy. He felt uneasy about leaving his mother and was disappointed by his students, who were lazy and did not pay their bills. His biggest disappointment was with the Manichees, who were also popular in Rome. He started to see that their teachings were wrong, but he still did not know what was right. Finally, some friends introduced him to a person who had been trying for some time to find a good professor for the Emperor’s court in Milan, in the north of Italy.

The Roman Forum as it probably looked in Ancient Rome
Augustine was chosen for this position, one of the most important teaching jobs in the whole Roman Empire. He was about thirty years old. In Milan, he met the man in charge of all the churches in that area. His name was Ambrose. People in charge of many churches were called bishops. Bishop Ambrose was older and more experienced than Augustine was and, like him, knew how to speak well and clearly. His sermons answered many of Augustine’s questions about God and the Bible.
Around that time, Monica arrived in Milan. She was very happy to see Augustine settled with a good job, and she really admired Ambrose. She thought Ambrose could help her son to become a true Christian. However, becoming a Christian was not easy for Augustine. He felt that there were two wills inside of him—one wanted to know God and live for Him and the other did not. One part of him wanted to study the Scriptures and know the truth, and the other part only wanted to have a good career, money, fame, and material joys. He tried to postpone the decision. “Give me just a little while longer,” he would ask God. But as he wrote later, “just a little while went on for a long while.”
Augustine sees a beggar.
One day Augustine was walking down a street in Milan with some friends. His head was full of thoughts and worries as he got ready to give an important speech before the Emperor himself. He knew that his speech was going to be full of lies but that was what everyone expected him to say. Suddenly, he saw a beggar who, in spite of his poverty, seemed happy because he had no cares and was not trying to impress anyone. Augustine thought for a while. If the goal of his life was to find happiness, this beggar had found it in a much quicker and easier way. He understood then the emptiness of his search for money and fame.

One day Augustine visited an old man named Simplicianus, who was well known and respected for his faith in God. Simplicianus told Augustine some stories of other young people who had been faced with the same difficult decisions.
One of Simplicianus’s stories was about a famous young speaker named Victorinus who called himself a Christian and wanted to become a part of God’s church, but did not think he needed to be baptized. Every time he said he was a Christian, Simplicianus would tell him, “I will not believe it until I see you in the church of God.” To that, the young man always replied, “Do walls make a Christian?” Finally, the Scriptures convinced this man that it was important to profess his faith before the church and to be baptized.

It was an important step for Victorinus. In those days famous people were not required to profess their faith in public, which could put them in danger. Victorinus’s public baptism showed his courage and faithfulness to the truth. This and other stories heard from Simplicianus and from some of his friends showed Augustine that he needed to make a similar surrender.
One day, as Augustine was lying down under a tree in a garden, praying to God in tears to help him end his terrible indecision, he heard a little child sing, “Take up and read! Take up and read!” It was probably a little children’s song, but Augustine took it as an invitation to take up his Bible and read it. The first words that he read were Romans 13:13–14, which told him to put on the Lord Jesus Christ as a new robe, and to stop giving in to his sinful nature. The Holy Spirit used this experience to bring Augustine to a true conversion.

Now Augustine was no longer undecided. He really wanted to be a Christian. He told his friends and his mother, who rejoiced with him. Later, looking back at all the struggle he had faced before the Holy Spirit converted him and at the peace he felt afterward, he said, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee.”
Augustine in the garden
Around that time, Augustine became ill. A pain in his chest made it impossible for him to continue his work as a teacher and speaker. A friend from Africa let him stay at his big villa near Milan, where Augustine was free to study and write. Augustine accepted the offer gladly, taking along his mother and other friends who had also become Christians. Together, they studied and discussed the Bible, excited about the truth that they were discovering. After about six months, Augustine returned to Milan with two of his friends and studied under Ambrose until they were ready to publicly profess their faith and be baptized. Augustine was then thirty-three years old.
The following year, Augustine decided to leave Milan to return to Africa with his mother and some friends. They planned to live together in Thagaste, just as they had done in the villa near Milan. Because of some fighting in Rome, they had to stop in Ostia, a small town near the Italian coast. There, Monica became very ill and died. Until that time, she had always wanted to be buried next to her husband, but now she did not care anymore. She was just happy that her son was finally a true Christian. Losing his mother was a very sad experience for Augustine, who mourned her death for many days.

Finally, around the end of 388, Augustine and his friends were able to leave Italy and return to North Africa, where they continued to live together, studying, discussing their discoveries, and writing.