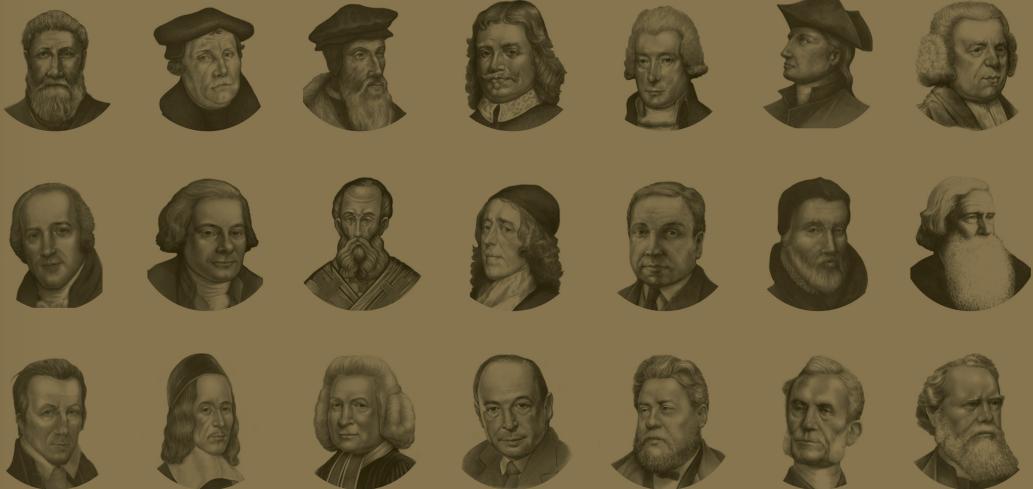


JOHN PIPER



21 SERVANTS *of SOVEREIGN JOY*

Faithful, Flawed, and Fruitful



21 Servants of Sovereign Joy

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21 Servants of Sovereign Joy

FAITHFUL, FLAWED, AND FRUITFUL

John Piper

21 Servants of Sovereign Joy: Faithful, Flawed, and Fruitful

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For The Legacy of Sovereign Joy and The Hidden Smile of God

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Preface

It brings me a great deal of pleasure at the beginning of this volume of collected biographies to pay tribute to a man without whom they would, in all likelihood, not exist. Iain Murray sowed the seeds from which this has all grown. There is a story behind this claim.

The Story behind the Tribute

During my first seven years in the pastoral ministry (1980–1987), I felt very green—inexperienced, and in some ways unprepared. Before coming to Bethlehem Baptist Church at the age of thirty-four, I had never been a pastor. I was in school full-time till I was twenty-eight and then taught college Bible courses until God called me to the pastoral ministry.

In seminary, I had avoided pastoral courses and taken as many exegetical courses as I could, not at all expecting to be a pastor. When I came to Bethlehem, I had never performed a funeral, never stood by the bed of a dying person, never led a council of elders or any other kind of council or committee, never baptized anyone, never done a baby dedication, and had only preached a couple dozen sermons in my life. That's what I mean by green.

During those first seven years, one of the ways I pursued wisdom for the pastoral work in front of me was the reading of pastoral biographies. For example, I devoured Warren Wiersbe's two volumes *Walking with the Giants: A Minister's Guide to Good Reading and Great Preaching* (1976), and *Listening to the Giants: A Guide to Good Reading and Great Preaching* (1980). Together they contained over thirty short biographies of men in pastoral ministry.

But one of the most enjoyable and inspiring things I did to deepen my grasp of the pastoral calling was to listen to a master life-storyteller,

Iain Murray. Murray had been a pastoral assistant with Martyn Lloyd-Jones in London and had served as a pastor in two churches in England and Australia. He is a cofounder of the Banner of Truth Trust and has devoted a great part of his life to biographical writing.

He is well-known for his biographies of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Jonathan Edwards, to mention only two. But not as many people know that Iain Murray is a master at taking an hour in a ministerial conference and telling the story of a great Christian in a way that instructs and inspires. For example, even today you can go online and find the (forty-plus-year-old) audio stories of Charles Spurgeon, Robert Dabney, William Tyndale, Ashbel Green, George Whitefield, John Knox, John Newton, William Jay, Thomas Hooker, and more.

The Latest Technology: Walkman

The latest technology in the early 1980s was the Walkman—a small cassette player that let me take Murray with me on my morning jogs or into the car. I listened to everything biographical I could get. This stoked the embers of my affections for biography. It has always felt to me that biography is one of the most enjoyable, edifying, and efficient ways to read history. *Enjoyable* because we all love a good story and the ecstasies and agonies of real life. *Edifying* because the faithfulness of God in the lives of contrite, courageous, forgiven sinners is strengthening for our own faith. *Efficient* because, in a good biography, you not only learn about a person's life but also about theology, psychology, philosophy, ethics, politics, economics, and church history. So I have long been a lover of biography.

I could be wrong, but my own opinion is that this volume would not exist without the inspiring ministry of Iain Murray's audio tapes. In 1987, it seemed to me that there was a need for a conference for pastors that would stir up a love for "the doctrines of grace," a zeal for the beauty of the gospel, a passion for God-centered preaching, a commitment to global missions, and a joy in Christ-exalting worship.

A Conference and Book Series Are Born

The first Bethlehem Conference for Pastors took place in 1988. Inspired by Iain Murray, I gave a biographical message every year for the next

twenty-seven years. That is where the mini-biographies in this volume come from (which means that all these chapters can be heard in audio form at www.desiringGod.org). Throughout the year before each conference, I would read about the life and ministry of some key figure in church history. Then I would decide on some thematic focus to give unity to the message, and I would try to distill my reading into an hour-long message. The messages—and the edited versions—are unashamedly hortatory. I aim to teach and encourage. I also aim never to distort the truth of a man’s life and work. But I do advocate for biblical truths that his life illustrates.

This volume contains seven collections with three historical figures each. The series was published under the title *The Swans Are Not Silent*. You can read the story behind that title in the preface to *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*. But the gist of it is this: when Augustine died, his successor felt so inadequate that he said, “The cricket chirps, the swan is silent.” The point of the series title is that, through biography, *the swans are not silent!* Augustine was not the only great voice that lives on. Thousands of voices live on. And their stories should be told and read.

Biography Is Biblically Mandated

It would be wonderfully rewarding to me if I heard that your reading of these stories brought you as much joy as I received in researching and writing them. If you need a greater incentive than that prospect, remember Hebrews 11. Surely this chapter is a divine mandate to read Christian biography. I wrote a chapter in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* that tried to make this case. It was titled “Brothers, Read Christian Biography.” I commented on Hebrews 11,

The unmistakable implication of the chapter is that if we hear about the faith of our forefathers (and mothers), we will “lay aside every weight and sin” and “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1). If we asked the author, “How shall we stir one another up to love and good works?” (10:24), his answer would be: “Through encouragement from the living *and the dead*” (10:25; 11:1–40). Christian biography is the means by which the “body life” of the church cuts across the centuries.¹

¹John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2013), 106–12.

Countless Benefits

I think that what was said of Abel in Hebrews 11:4 can be said of any saint whose story is told: “Through his faith, though he died, he still speaks” (ESV). It has been a great pleasure as I have listened to these voices. But not only a pleasure. They have strengthened my hand in the work of the ministry again and again. They have helped me feel that I was part of something much bigger than myself or my century. They have showed me that the worst of times are not the last of times, and they made the promise visible that God works all things for our good. They have modeled courage and perseverance in the face of withering opposition. They have helped me set my face to the cause of truth and love and world evangelization. They have revived my love for Christ’s church. They have reinforced my resolve to be a faithful husband and father. They have stirred me up to care about seeing and savoring the beauty of God. They inspired the effort to speak that beauty in a way that it doesn’t bore. They quickened a love for Christian camaraderie in the greatest Cause in the world. And they did all this—and more—in a way that caused me to rejoice in the Lord and be glad I was in his sway and his service.

I pray that all of this and more will be your pleasure and your profit as you read or listen. For the swans are definitely not silent.

John Piper
July 2016

The Swans Are Not Silent

Book 1

The Legacy of Sovereign Joy

*God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of
Augustine, Luther, and Calvin*

To Jon Bloom

whose heart and hands
sustain the song

at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors
and Desiring God Ministries

The Legacy of Sovereign Joy

Book 1

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The sum of all our goods, and our perfect good, is God. We must not fall short of this, nor seek anything beyond it; the first is dangerous, the other impossible.

St. Augustine

Morals of the Catholic Church

Preface

At the age of seventy-one, four years before he died on August 28, AD 430, Aurelius Augustine handed over the administrative duties of the church in Hippo on the northern coast of Africa to his assistant Eraclius. Already, in his own lifetime, Augustine was a giant in the Christian world. At the ceremony, Eraclius stood to preach as the aged Augustine sat on his bishop's throne behind him. Overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy in Augustine's presence, Eraclius said, "The cricket chirps, the swan is silent."¹

If only Eraclius could have looked down over sixteen centuries at the enormous influence of Augustine, he would have understood why the series of books beginning with *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* is titled The Swans Are Not Silent. For 1,600 years, Augustine has not been silent. In the 1500s, his voice rose to a compelling crescendo in the ears of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Luther was an Augustinian monk, and Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other church father. Augustine's influence on the Protestant Reformation was extraordinary. A thousand years could not silence his song of jubilant grace. More than one historian has said, "The Reformation witnessed the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over the legacy of the Pelagian view of man"²—the view that man is able to triumph over his own bondage to sin.

The swan also sang in the voice of Martin Luther in more than one sense. All over Germany you will find swans on church steeples, and for centuries Luther has been portrayed in works of art with a swan at his feet. Why is this? The reason goes back a century before Luther.

¹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 408.

²R. C. Sproul, "Augustine and Pelagius," in *Tabletalk*, June 1996: 11. See the introduction in this book (n. 24) for a similar statement from Benjamin Warfield. See chapter 1 on the meaning of Pelagianism.

John Hus, who died in 1415, a hundred years before Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses on the Wittenberg door (1517), was a professor and later president of the University of Prague. He was born of peasant stock and preached in the common language instead of Latin. He translated the New Testament into Czech, and he spoke out against abuses in the Catholic Church.

“In 1412 a papal bull was issued against Hus and his followers. Anyone could kill the Czech reformer on sight, and those who gave him food or shelter would suffer the same fate. When three of Hus’s followers spoke publicly against the practice of selling indulgences, they were captured and beheaded.”³ In December 1414, Hus himself was arrested and kept in prison until March 1415. He was kept in chains and brutally tortured for his views, which anticipated the Reformation by a hundred years.

On July 6, 1415, he was burned at the stake along with his books. One tradition says that in his cell just before his death, Hus wrote, “Today, you are burning a goose [the meaning of ‘Hus’ in Czech]; however, a hundred years from now, you will be able to hear a swan sing, you will not burn it, you will have to listen to him.”⁴ Martin Luther boldly saw himself as a fulfillment of this prophecy and wrote in 1531, “John Hus prophesied of me when he wrote from his prison in Bohemia: They will now roast a goose (for Hus means a goose), but after a hundred years they will hear a swan sing; him they will have to tolerate. And so it shall continue, if it please God.”⁵

And so it has continued. The great voices of grace sing on today. And I count it a great joy to listen and to echo their song in this little book and, God willing, the ones to follow.

Although these chapters on Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were originally given as biographical messages at the annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, there is a reason why I put them together here for a wider audience including laypeople. Their combined message is profoundly relevant in this modern world at the beginning of a new millennium. R. C. Sproul is right that “we need an Augustine or a Luther to speak to us anew lest the light of God’s grace be not only overshadowed

³Erwin Weber, “Luther with the Swan,” *The Lutheran Journal* 65, no. 2 (1996): 10.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Martin Luther, quoted in Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says, An Anthology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 3:1175.

but be obliterated in our time.”⁶ Yes, and perhaps the best that a cricket can do is to let the swans sing.

Augustine’s song of grace is unlike anything you will read in almost any modern book about grace. The omnipotent power of grace, for Augustine, is the power of “sovereign joy.” This alone delivered him from a lifetime of bondage to sexual appetite and philosophical pride. Discovering that beneath the vaunted powers of human will is a cauldron of desire holding us captive to irrational choices opens the way to see grace as the triumph of “sovereign joy.” Oh, how we need the ancient biblical insight of Augustine to free us from the pleasant slavery that foils the fulfillment of the Great Commandment and the finishing of the Great Commission.

I am not sure that Martin Luther and John Calvin saw the conquering grace of “sovereign joy” as clearly as Augustine. But what they saw even more clearly was the supremacy of the Word of God over the church and the utter necessity of sacred study at the spring of truth. Luther found his way into paradise through the gate of New Testament Greek, and Calvin bequeathed to us a five-hundred-year legacy of God-entranced preaching because his eyes were opened to see the divine majesty of the Word. My prayer in writing this book is that, once we see Augustine’s vision of grace as “sovereign joy,” the lessons of Luther’s study will strengthen it by the Word of God, and the lessons of Calvin’s preaching will spread it to the ends of the earth. This is *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*.

Augustine “never wrote what could be called a treatise on prayer.”⁷ Instead, his writing flows in and out of prayer. This is because, for him, “the whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire.”⁸ And this desire is for God, above all things and in all things. This is the desire I write to awaken and sustain. And therefore I pray with Augustine for myself and for you, the reader,

Turn not away your face from me, that I may find what I seek. Turn not aside in anger from your servant, lest in seeking you I run toward something else. . . . Be my helper. Leave me not, neither despise me, O God my Savior. Scorn not that a mortal should seek the Eternal.⁹

⁶Sproul, “Augustine and Pelagius,” 52.

⁷Thomas A. Hand, *Augustine on Prayer* (New York: Catholic Book, 1986), 11.

⁸Ibid., 20.

⁹Ibid., 27.

Acknowledgments

How thankful I am for a wife and children who, several weeks each year (at least), unbegrudgingly let me live in another century. This is where I go to prepare the biographical messages for the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. All the while, Jon Bloom, the director of Desiring God Ministries, is masterfully managing a thousand details that bring hundreds of hungry shepherds together in the dead of winter in Minneapolis. That conference, those biographies, and this book would not exist without him and the hundreds of Bethlehem volunteers who respond to his call each year.

To steal away into the Blue Ridge Mountains for a season to put this book together in its present form has been a precious gift. I owe this productive seclusion to the hospitality of the team of God's servants at the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove. May God grant the dream of Dr. Graham to flourish from this place—that those who attend the seminars at The Cove “will leave here transformed and prepared for action—equipped to be an effective witness for Christ.”

A special word of thanks to Lane Dennis of Crossway for his interest in these biographical studies and his willingness to make them available to a wider audience. And thanks to Carol Steinbach again for her help with this project.

Finally, I thank Jesus Christ for giving to the church teachers like St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. “He gave some . . . pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). I am the beneficiary of this great work of equipping the saints that these three have done for centuries. Thank you, Father, that the swans are not silent. May their song of triumphant grace continue to be sung in *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*.

This will be written for the generation to come,
That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.
Psalm 102:18

One generation shall praise Your works to another,
And shall declare Your mighty acts.

Psalm 145:4

Introduction

Savoring the Sovereignty of Grace in the Lives of Flawed Saints

The Point of History

God ordains that we gaze on his glory, dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God. “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7 RSV). The God who fashions the hearts of all men (Ps. 33:15) means for their lives to display his truth and his worth. From Phoebe to St. Francis, the divine plan—even spoken of the pagan Pharaoh—holds firm for all: “I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (Rom. 9:17 RSV). From David the king to David Brainerd, the missionary, extraordinary and incomplete specimens of godliness and wisdom have kindled the worship of sovereign grace in the hearts of reminiscing saints. “This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD” (Ps. 102:18).

The history of the world is a field strewn with broken stones, which are sacred altars designed to waken worship in the hearts of those who will take the time to read and remember. “I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds. Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God?” (Ps. 77:11–13). The aim of providence in the history of the world is the worship of the people of God. Ten thousand stories of grace and truth are meant to be remembered for the refinement

of faith and the sustaining of hope and the guidance of love. “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4 RSV). Those who nurture their hope in the history of grace will live their lives to the glory of God. That is the aim of this book.

It is a book about three famous and flawed fathers in the Christian church. Therefore, it is a book about grace, not only because the faithfulness of God triumphs over the flaws of men, but also because this was the very theme of their lives and work. Aurelius Augustine (354–430), Martin Luther (1483–1546), and John Calvin (1509–1564) had this in common: they experienced, and then built their lives and ministries on, the reality of God’s omnipotent grace. In this way their common passion for the supremacy of God was preserved from the taint of human competition. Each of them confessed openly that the essence of experiential Christianity is the glorious triumph of grace over the guilty impotence of man.

Augustine’s Discovery of “Sovereign Joy”

At first Augustine resisted the triumph of grace as an enemy. But then, in a garden in Milan, Italy, when he was thirty-one, the power of grace through the truth of God’s Word broke fifteen years of bondage to sexual lust and living with a concubine. His resistance was finally overcome by “sovereign joy,” the beautiful name he gave to God’s grace. “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose . . . ! You drove them from me, you who are the true, the *sovereign joy*. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.”¹

Then, in his maturity and to the day of his death, Augustine fought the battle for grace as a submissive captive to “sovereign joy” against his contemporary and arch-antagonist, the British monk Pelagius. Nothing shocked Pelagius more than the stark declaration of omnipotent grace in Augustine’s prayer: “Command what you wish, but give what you command.”² Augustine knew that his liberty from lust and his power

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 181 (IX, 1), emphasis added.

² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 179. The quote is found in Augustine, *Confessions*, 40 (X, 29).

to live for Christ and his understanding of biblical truth hung on the validity of that prayer. He was painfully aware of the hopelessness of leaning on free will as a help against lust.

Who is not aghast at the sudden crevasses that might open in the life of a dedicated man? When I was writing this, we were told that a man of 84, who had lived a life of continence under religious observance with a pious wife for 25 years, has gone and bought himself a music-girl for his pleasure. . . . If the angels were left to their own free-will, even they might lapse, and the world be filled with “new devils.”³

Augustine knew that the same would happen to him if God left him to lean on his own free will for faith and purity. The battle for omnipotent grace was not theoretical or academic; it was practical and pressing. At stake was holiness and heaven. Therefore he fought with all his might for the supremacy of grace against the Pelagian exaltation of man’s ultimate self-determination.⁴

Luther’s Pathway into Paradise

For Martin Luther, the triumph of grace came not in a garden but in a study, and not primarily over lust but over the fear of God’s wrath. “If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.”⁵ He might have said “sovereign joy.” But he could not believe it. And the great external obstacle was not a concubine in Milan, Italy, but a biblical text in Wittenberg, Germany. “A single word in [Rom. 1:17], ‘In [the gospel] the *righteousness of God* is revealed’ . . . stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God.’”⁶ He had been taught that the “righteousness of God” meant the justice “with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.”⁷ This was no relief and no gospel. Whereas Augustine “tore [his] hair and hammered [his] forehead with his fists” in hopelessness over bondage to sexual passion,⁸

³ *Contra Julian*, III, x, 22, quoted in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 405.

⁴ The book Augustine himself saw as his “most fundamental demolition of Pelagianism” (Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 372) is *On the Spirit and the Letter*, in *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1965), 182–251.

⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (orig. 1982; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 315.

⁶ John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 11, emphasis added.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life. . . . I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into

Luther “raged with a fierce and troubled conscience . . . [and] beat importunately upon Paul at that place [Rom. 1:17], most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.”⁹

The breakthrough came in 1518, not, as with Augustine, by the sudden song of a child chanting, “Take it and read,”¹⁰ but by the unrelenting study of the historical-grammatical context of Romans 1:17. This sacred study proved to be a precious means of grace. “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely . . . ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”¹¹ This was the joy that turned the world upside-down.

Justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law, was the triumph of grace in the life of Martin Luther. He did, you might say, stand on his head for joy, and with him all the world was turned upside-down. But the longer he lived, the more he was convinced that there was a deeper issue beneath this doctrine and its conflict with the meritorious features of indulgences¹² and purgatory. In the end, it was not Johann Tetzel’s sale of indulgences or Johann Eck’s promotion of purgatory that produced Luther’s most passionate defense of God’s omnipotent grace; it was Desiderius Erasmus’s defense of free will.

Erasmus was to Luther what Pelagius was to Augustine. Martin Luther conceded that Erasmus, more than any other opponent, had realized that the powerlessness of man before God, not the indulgence controversy or purgatory, was the central question of the Christian faith.¹³ Luther’s book *The Bondage of the Will*, published in 1525, was an answer to Erasmus’s book *The Freedom of the Will*. Luther regarded this one book of his—*The Bondage of the Will*—as his “best theological book, and the only one in that class worthy of publication.”¹⁴ This is

your covenant. . . . I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees,” Augustine, *Confessions*, 170–71 (VIII, 8).

⁹ Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections*, 12.

¹⁰ See chapter 1 of this book for the details of this remarkable story.

¹¹ Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections*, 12.

¹² Indulgences were the sale of release from temporal punishment for sin through the payment of money to the Roman Catholic Church—for yourself or another in purgatory.

¹³ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 220.

¹⁴ Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections*, 167.

because at the heart of Luther's theology was a total dependence on the freedom of God's omnipotent grace to rescue powerless man from the bondage of the will. "Man cannot by his own power purify his heart and bring forth godly gifts, such as true repentance for sins, a true, as over against an artificial, fear of God, true faith, sincere love. . . ."¹⁵ Erasmus's exaltation of man's fallen will as free to overcome its own sin and bondage was, in Luther's mind, an assault on the freedom of God's grace and therefore an attack on the very gospel itself, and ultimately on the glory of God. Thus Luther proved himself to be a faithful student of St. Augustine and St. Paul to the very end.

Calvin's Encounter with the Divine Majesty of the Word

For John Calvin, the triumph of God's grace in his own life and theology was the self-authenticating demonstration of the majesty of God in the Word of Scripture. How are we to know that the Bible is the Word of God? Do we lean on the testimony of man—the authority of the church, as in Roman Catholicism? Or are we more immediately dependent on the majesty of God's grace? Sometime in his early twenties, before 1533, at the University of Paris, Calvin's resistance to grace was conquered for the glory of God and for the cause of the Reformation. "God, by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame. . . . Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with [an] intense desire to make progress."¹⁶ With this "taste" and this "intense desire," the legacy of sovereign joy took root in another generation.

The power that "subdued" his mind was the manifestation of the majesty of God. "Our Heavenly Father, revealing *his majesty* [in Scripture], lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy."¹⁷ There is the key for Calvin: the witness of God to Scripture is the immediate, unassailable, life-giving revelation to our minds of *the majesty of God* that is manifest in the Scriptures themselves. This was his testimony to the omnipotent grace of God in his life: the blind eyes of his spirit were opened, and what he saw immediately, and without a

¹⁵ Conrad Bergendoff, ed., *Church and Ministry II*, Luther's Works, vol. 40 (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1958), 301.

¹⁶ John Dillenberger, ed., *John Calvin, Selections from His Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1975), 26.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), I.viii.13, emphasis added.

lengthy chain of human reasoning, were two things so interwoven that they would determine the rest of his life—the majesty of God and the Word of God. The Word mediated the majesty, and the majesty vindicated the Word. Henceforth he would be a man utterly devoted to displaying the supremacy of God's glory by the exposition of God's Word.

United with a Passion for the Supremacy of Divine Grace

In all of this, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were one. Their passion was to display above all things the glory of God through the exaltation of his omnipotent grace. Augustine's entire life was one great "confession" of the glory of God's grace: "O Lord, my Helper and my Redeemer, I shall now tell and confess *to the glory of your name* how you released me from the fetters of lust which held me so tightly shackled and from my slavery to the things of this world."¹⁸ From the beginning of Luther's discovery of grace, displaying the glory of God was the driving force of his labor. "I recall that at the beginning of my cause Dr. Staupitz, who was then a man of great importance and vicar of the Augustinian Order, said to me: 'It pleases me that the doctrine which you preach ascribes the glory and everything to God alone and nothing to man.'"¹⁹ Calvin's course was fixed from his first dispute with Cardinal Sadolet in 1539 when he charged the Cardinal to "set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, *zeal to illustrate the glory of God*."²⁰

Under Christ, Augustine's influence on Luther and Calvin was second only to the influence of the apostle Paul. Augustine towers over the thousand years between himself and the Reformation, heralding the sovereign joy of God's triumphant grace for all generations. Adolf Harnack said that he was the greatest man "between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer, the Christian Church has possessed."²¹ The stan-

¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 166 (VIII, 6).

¹⁹ Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, 3 vols. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 3:1374.

²⁰ Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, 89, emphasis added.

²¹ Adolf Harnack, "Monasticism and the Confessions of St. Augustine," quoted in Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R, 1971), 306. Although "[Augustine's] direct work as a reformer of Church life was done in a corner, and its results were immediately swept away by the flood of the Vandal invasion . . . it was through his voluminous writings, by which his wider influence was exerted, that he entered both the Church and the world as a revolutionary force, and not merely created an epoch in the history of the Church, but has determined the course of its history in the West up to the present day" (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 306). Anselm, Aquinas, Petrarch (never without a pocket copy of the *Confessions*), Luther, Bellarmine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard all stand in the shade of [Augustine's] broad oak. His writings were among the favourite books of Wittgenstein. He was the *bête noire* of Nietzsche. His psychological analysis anticipated parts of Freud: he first discovered the existence of the 'sub-conscious.' . . . He was 'the first modern man' in the sense that with him the reader feels himself addressed at a level of extraordinary

dard text on theology that Calvin and Luther drank from was *Sentences* by Peter Lombard. Nine-tenths of this book consists of quotations from Augustine, and it was for centuries the textbook for theological studies.²² Luther was an Augustinian monk, and Calvin immersed himself in the writings of Augustine, as we can see from the increased use of Augustine's writings in each new edition of the *Institutes*. "In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* he quotes Augustine 20 times, three years later 113, in 1543 it was 128 times, 141 in 1550 and finally, no less than 342 in 1559."²³

Not surprisingly, therefore, yet paradoxically, one of the most esteemed fathers of the Roman Catholic Church "gave us the Reformation." Benjamin Warfield put it like this: "The Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church."²⁴ In other words, there were tensions within Augustine's thought that explain why he could be cited by both Roman Catholics and by Reformers as a champion.

God's Grace over the Flaws of Great Saints

This brings us back to an earlier point. This book, which is about Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, is a book about the glory of God's omnipotent grace, not only because it was the unifying theme of their work, but also because this grace triumphed over the flaws in these men's lives. Augustine's most famous work is called the *Confessions* in large measure because his whole ministry was built on the wonder that God could forgive and use a man who had sold himself to so much

psychological depth and confronted by a coherent system of thought, large parts of which still make potent claims to attention and respect" (Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 3).

²² Agostino Trapé, *Saint Augustine: Man, Pastor, Mystic* (New York: Catholic Book, 1986), 333–34.

²³ T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954), 44.

²⁴ Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 322–23. "This doctrine of grace came from Augustine's hands in its positive outline completely formulated: sinful man depends, for his recovery to good and to God, entirely on the free grace of God; this grace is therefore indispensable, prevenient, irresistible, indefectible; and, being thus the free grace of God, must have lain, in all the details of its conference and working, in the intention of God from all eternity. But, however clearly announced and forcefully commanded by him, it required to make its way against great obstacles in the Church. As over against the Pelagians, the indispensableness of grace was quickly established; as over against the Semi-Pelagians, its prevenience was with almost equal rapidity made good. But there advance paused. If the necessity of prevenient grace was thereafter (after the Council of Orange, 529) the established doctrine of the Church, the irresistibility of this prevenient grace was put under the ban, and there remained no place for a complete 'Augustinianism' within the Church. . . . Therefore, when the great revival of religion which we call the Reformation came, seeing that it was, on its theological side, a revival of 'Augustinianism,' as all great revivals of religion must be (for 'Augustinianism' is but the thetical expression of religion in its purity), there was nothing for it but the rending of the Church. And therefore also the greatest peril to the Reformation was and remains the diffused anti-'Augustinianism' in the world."

sensuality for so long. And now we add to this imperfection the flaws of Augustine's theology suggested by Warfield's comment that his doctrine of grace triumphed over his doctrine of the church. Of course, this will be disputed. But from my perspective he is correct to draw attention to Augustine's weaknesses amid massive strengths.

Augustine's Dubious Record on Sex and Sacraments

For example, it is a perplexing incongruity that Augustine would exalt the free and sovereign grace of God so supremely and yet hold to a view of baptism that makes the act of man so decisive in the miracle of regeneration. Baptismal regeneration and spiritual awakening by the power of the Word of God do not fit together. The way Augustine speaks of baptism seems to go against his entire experience of God's grace, awakening and transforming him through the Word of God in Milan. In the *Confessions* he mentions a friend who was baptized while unconscious and comes to his senses changed.²⁵ "In a way that Augustine never claimed to understand, the physical rites of baptism and ordination 'brand' a permanent mark on the recipient, quite independent of his conscious qualities."²⁶ He regretted not having been baptized as a youth and believed that ritual would have spared him much misery. "It would have been much better if I had been healed at once and if all that I and my family could do had been done to make sure that once my soul had received its salvation, its safety should be left in your keeping, since its salvation had come from you. This would surely have been the better course."²⁷ Peter Brown writes that Augustine "had once hoped to understand the rite of infant baptism: 'Reason will find that out.' Now he will appeal, not to reason, but to the rooted feelings of the Catholic masses."²⁸

Of course, Augustine is not alone in mingling a deep knowledge of grace with defective views and flawed living. Every worthy theologian and every true saint does the same. Every one of them confesses, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). "Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become

²⁵ Cited in Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 222 (IV.iv.8).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 32 (I, 11).

²⁸ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 280.

perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). But the famous flawed saints have their flaws exposed and are criticized vigorously for it.

Diverse Defects of Different Men

Martin Luther and John Calvin were seriously flawed saints. The flaws grew in the soil of very powerful—and very different—personalities.

How different the upbringing of the two men—the one, the son of a German miner, singing for his livelihood under the windows of the well-to-do burghers; the other, the son of a French procurator-fiscal, delicately reared and educated with the children of the nobility. How different, too, their temperaments—Luther, hearty, jovial, jocund, sociable, filling his goblet day by day from the Town Council's wine-cellar; Calvin, lean, austere, retiring, given to fasting and wakefulness.... Luther was a man of the people, endowed with passion, poetry, imagination, fire, whereas Calvin was cold, refined, courteous, able to speak to nobles and address crowned heads, and seldom, if ever, needing to retract or even to regret his words.²⁹

Luther's Dirty Mouth and Lapse of Love

But, oh, how many words did Luther regret! This was the downside of a delightfully blunt and open emotional life, filled with humor as well as anger. Heiko Oberman refers to Luther's "jocular theologizing."³⁰ "If I ever have to find myself a wife again, I will hew myself an obedient wife out of stone."³¹ "In domestic affairs I defer to Katie. Otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost."³² "I have legitimate children, which no papal theologian has."³³ His personal experience is always present. "With Luther feelings force their way everywhere. . . . He himself is passionately present, not only teaching life by faith but living faith himself."³⁴ This makes him far more interesting and attractive as a person than Calvin, but far more volatile and offensive—depending on what side of the joke you happen to be on. We cannot imagine today (as much as we might

²⁹ Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters* (London: J. M. Dent, 1909), 109–10.

³⁰ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

³² William J. Peterson, *Martin Luther Had a Wife* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1983), 14.

³³ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 278.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 312–13.

like to) a university professor doing theology the way Luther did it. The leading authority on Luther comments, “[Luther] would look in vain for a chair in theology today at Harvard. . . . It is the Erasmian type of ivory-tower academic that has gained international acceptance.”³⁵

With all its spice, his language could also move toward crudity and hatefulness. His longtime friend Melanchthon did not hesitate to mention Luther’s “sharp tongue” and “heated temper” even as he gave his funeral oration.³⁶ There were also the four-letter words and the foul “bathroom” talk. He confessed from time to time that it was excessive. “Many accused me of proceeding too severely. Severely, that is true, and often too severely; but it was a question of the salvation of all, even my opponents.”³⁷

We who are prone to fault him for his severity and mean-spirited language can scarcely imagine what the battle was like in those days, and what it was like to be the target of so many vicious, slanderous, and life-threatening attacks. “He could not say a word that would not be heard and pondered everywhere.”³⁸ It will be fair to let Luther and one of his balanced admirers put his harshness and his crudeness in perspective. First Luther himself:

I own that I am more vehement than I ought to be; but I have to do with men who blaspheme evangelical truth; with human wolves; with those who condemn me unheard, without admonishing, without instructing me; and who utter the most atrocious slanders against myself not only, but the Word of God. Even the most phlegmatic spirit, so circumstanced, might well be moved to speak thunderbolts; much more I who am choleric by nature, and possessed of a temper easily apt to exceed the bounds of moderation.

I cannot, however, but be surprised to learn whence the novel taste arose which daintily calls everything spoken against an adversary abusive and acrimonious. What think ye of Christ? Was he a reviler when he called the Jews an adulterous and perverse generation, a progeny of vipers, hypocrites, children of the devil?

What think you of Paul? Was he abusive when he termed the enemies of the gospel dogs and seducers? Paul who, in the thirteenth chapter of the Acts, inveighs against a false prophet in this manner: “Oh, full of subtlety and all malice, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness.” I

³⁵ Ibid., 313.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷ Ibid., 322.

³⁸ Ibid., 298.

pray you, good Spalatin, read me this riddle. *A mind conscious of truth cannot always endure the obstinate and willfully blind enemies of truth.* I see that all persons demand of me moderation, and especially those of my adversaries, who least exhibit it. If I am too warm, I am at least open and frank; in which respect I excel those who always smile, but murder.³⁹

It may seem futile to ponder the positive significance of filthy language, but let the reader judge whether “the world’s foremost authority on Luther”⁴⁰ helps us grasp a partially redemptive purpose in Luther’s occasionally foul mouth.

Luther’s scatology-permeated language has to be taken seriously as an expression of the painful battle fought body and soul against the Adversary, who threatens both flesh and spirit. . . . The filthy vocabulary of Reformation propaganda [was] aimed at inciting the common man. . . . Luther used a great deal of invective, but there was method in it. . . . Inclination and conviction unite to form a mighty alliance, fashioning a new language of filth which is more than filthy language. Precisely in all its repulsiveness and perversion it verbalizes the unspeakable: the diabolic profanation of God and man. Luther’s lifelong barrage of crude words hurled at the opponents of the Gospel is robbed of significance if attributed to bad breeding. When taken seriously, it reveals the task Luther saw before him: to do battle against the greatest slanderer of all times!⁴¹

Nevertheless most will agree that even though the thrust and breakthrough of the Reformation against such massive odds required someone of Luther’s forcefulness, a line was often crossed into unwarranted invective and sin. Heiko Oberman is surely right to say, “Where resistance to the Papal State, fanaticism, and Judaism turns into the collective vilification of papists, Anabaptists, and Jews, the fatal point has been reached where the discovery of the Devil’s power becomes a liability and a danger.”⁴² Luther’s sometimes malicious anti-Semitism was an inexcusable contradiction of the Gospel he preached. Oberman observes with soberness and depth that Luther aligned himself with the Devil here, and the lesson to be learned is that this is possible for Christians, and to demythologize it is to leave Luther’s anti-Semitism in the

³⁹ W. Carlos Martyn, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther* (New York: ATS, 1866), 380–81.

⁴⁰ The plaudit comes from professor Steven Ozment of Harvard University, printed on the back of Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*.

⁴¹ Oberman, *Luther*, 109.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 303.

hands of modern unbelief with no weapon against it.⁴³ In other words, the Devil is real and can trip a great man into graceless behavior, even as he recovers grace from centuries of obscurity.

Calvin's Accommodation to Brutal Times

John Calvin was very different from Luther but just as much a child of his harsh and rugged age. He and Luther never met, but had profound respect for each other. When Luther read Calvin's defense of the Reformation to Cardinal Sadolet in 1539, he said, "Here is a writing which has hands and feet. I rejoice that God raises up such men."⁴⁴ Calvin returned the respect in the one letter to Luther that we know of, which Luther did not receive. "Would that I could fly to you that I might, even for a few hours, enjoy the happiness of your society; for I would prefer, and it would be far better . . . to converse personally with yourself; but seeing that it is not granted to us on earth, I hope that shortly it will come to pass in the kingdom of God."⁴⁵ Knowing their circumstances better than we, and perhaps knowing their own sins better than we, they could pass over each other's flaws more easily in their affections.

It has not been so easy for others. The greatness of the accolades for John Calvin have been matched by the seriousness and severity of the criticisms. In his own day, even his brilliant contemporaries stood in awe of Calvin's grasp of the fullness of Scripture. At the 1541 Conference at Worms, Melanchthon expressed that he was overwhelmed at Calvin's learning and called him simply "The Theologian." In modern times, T. H. L. Parker agrees and says, "Augustine and Luther were perhaps his superiors in creative thinking; Aquinas in philosophy; but in systematic theology Calvin stands supreme."⁴⁶ And Benjamin Warfield

⁴³Ibid., 297.

⁴⁴Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, 68.

⁴⁵Ibid., 113–14.

⁴⁶Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 49. Jakobus Arminius, usually considered the historic antagonist of Calvinism, wrote, "[Calvin] excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture, and his commentaries ought to be more highly valued than all that is handed down to us by the Library of the Fathers" (Alfred T. Davies, *John Calvin and the Influence of Protestantism on National Life and Character* [London: Henry E. Walter, 1946], 24). "He stands out in the history of biblical study as, what Diestel, for example, proclaims him, 'the creator of genuine exegesis.' The authority which his comments immediately acquired was immense—they 'opened the Scriptures' as the Scriptures never had been opened before. Richard Hooker—"the judicious Hooker"—remarks that in the controversies of his own time, 'the sense of Scripture which Calvin alloweth' was of more weight than if 'ten thousand Augustines, Jeromes, Chrysostoms, Cyprians were brought forward'" (*Warfield, Calvin and Augustine*, 9).

said, “No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he.”⁴⁷ But the times were barbarous, and not even Calvin could escape the evidences of his own sinfulness and the blind spots of his own age.

Life was harsh, even brutal, in the sixteenth century. There was no sewer system or piped water supply or central heating or refrigeration or antibiotics or penicillin or aspirin or surgery for appendicitis or Novocain for tooth extraction or electric lights for studying at night or water heaters or washers or dryers or stoves or ballpoint pens or typewriters or computers. Calvin, like many others in his day, suffered from “almost continuous ill-health.”⁴⁸ If life could be miserable physically, it could get even more dangerous socially and more grievous morally. The libertines in Calvin’s church, like their counterparts in first-century Corinth, reveled in treating the “communion of saints” as a warrant for wife-swapping.⁴⁹ Calvin’s opposition made him the victim of mob violence and musket fire more than once.

Not only were the times unhealthy, harsh, and immoral, they were often barbaric as well. This is important to see, because Calvin did not escape the influence of his times. He described in a letter the cruelty common in Geneva. “A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered who, for the space of three years, had [intentionally] spread the plague through the city, by what mischievous device I know not.” The upshot of this was that fifteen women were burned at the stake. “Some men,” Calvin said, “have even been punished more severely; some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners, the conspirators do not cease . . . to smear the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment.”⁵⁰

This kind of capital punishment loomed on the horizon not just for criminals, but for the Reformers themselves. Calvin was driven out of his homeland, France, under threat of death. For the next twenty years, he agonized over the martyrs there and corresponded with many of them as they walked faithfully toward the stake. The same fate easily could have befallen Calvin with the slightest turn in providence. “We have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death

⁴⁷ Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 24.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (orig. French ed., 1562; orig. English trans., 1577; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), viii. For details on Calvin’s miseries, see chapter 3.

⁴⁹ Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 63.

are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity.”⁵¹

This atmosphere gave rise to the greatest and the worst achievement of Calvin. The greatest was the writing of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and the worst was his joining in the condemnation of the heretic Michael Servetus to burning at the stake in Geneva. The *Institutes* was first published in March 1536, when Calvin was twenty-six years old. It went through five editions and enlargements until it reached its present form in the 1559 edition. If this were all Calvin had written—and not forty-eight volumes of other works—it would have established him as the foremost theologian of the Reformation. But the work did not arise for merely academic reasons. We will see in chapter 3 that it arose in tribute and defense of Protestant martyrs in France.⁵²

But it was this same cruelty from which he could not disentangle himself. Michael Servetus was a Spaniard, a medical doctor, a lawyer, and a theologian. His doctrine of the Trinity was unorthodox—so much so that it shocked both Catholic and Protestant in his day. In 1553, he published his views and was arrested by the Catholics in France. But, alas, he escaped to Geneva. He was arrested there, and Calvin argued the case against him. He was sentenced to death. Calvin called for a swift execution instead of burning, but Servetus was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553.⁵³

This has tarnished Calvin’s name so severely that many cannot give his teaching a hearing. But it is not clear that most of us, given that milieu, would not have acted similarly under the circumstances.⁵⁴ Melanchthon was the gentle, soft-spoken associate of Martin Luther whom Calvin had met and loved. He wrote to Calvin on the Servetus affair, “I am wholly of your opinion and declare also that your magistrates acted quite justly in condemning the blasphemer to death.”⁵⁵ Calvin never held civil office in Geneva⁵⁶ but exerted all his influence as a pastor. Yet in this execution, his hands were as stained with Servetus’s blood as David’s were with Uriah’s.

This makes the confessions of Calvin near the end of his life all the

⁵¹ Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, 71.

⁵² Ibid., 27.

⁵³ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 102.

⁵⁴ Parker describes some of those circumstances in *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, 196.

⁵⁶ Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 16.

more important. On April 25, 1564, a month before his death, he called the magistrates of the city to his room and spoke these words:

With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which [God] has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of his death and passion, that in this way he might satisfy for *all my crimes and faults*, and blot them from his remembrance. . . . I confess I have failed innumerable times to execute my office properly, and had not He, of His boundless goodness, assisted me, all that zeal had been fleeting and vain. . . . For all these reasons, I testify and declare that I trust to no other security for my salvation than this, and this only, viz., that as God is the Father of mercy, he will show himself such a Father to me, who acknowledge myself to be a *miserable sinner*.⁵⁷

T. H. L. Parker said, “He should never have fought the battle of faith with the world’s weapons.”⁵⁸ Most of us today would agree. Whether Calvin came to that conclusion before he died, we don’t know. But what we know is that Calvin knew himself a “miserable sinner” whose only hope in view of “all [his] crimes” was the mercy of God and the blood of Jesus.

Why We Need the Flawed Fathers

So the times were harsh, immoral, and barbarous and had a contaminating effect on everyone, just as we are all contaminated by the evils of our own time. Their blind spots and evils may be different from ours. And it may be that the very things they saw clearly are the things we are blind to. It would be naïve to say that we never would have done what they did under their circumstances, and thus draw the conclusion that they have nothing to teach us. In fact, we are, no doubt, blind to many of our evils, just as they were blind to many of theirs. The virtues they manifested in those times are probably the very ones that we need in ours. There was in the life and ministry of John Calvin a grand God-centeredness, Bible-allegiance, and iron constancy. Under the banner of God’s mercy to miserable sinners, we would do well to listen and learn. And that goes for Martin Luther and St. Augustine as well.

The conviction behind this book is that the glory of God, however

⁵⁷ Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, 35, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, 103.

dimly, is mirrored in the flawed lives of his faithful servants. God means for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the beauty of their God. This is what I hope will happen through the reading of this book. There are life-giving lessons written by the hand of Divine Providence on every page of history. The great German and the great Frenchman drank from the great African, and God gave the life of the Reformation.

But let us be admonished, finally, from the mouth of Luther that the only original, true, and life-giving spring is the Word of God. Beware of replacing the pure mountain spring of Scripture with the sullied streams of great saints. They are precious, but they are not pure. So we say with Luther,

The writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time, in order that through them we may be led to the Holy Scriptures. As it is, however, we read them only to be absorbed in them and never come to the Scriptures. We are like men who study the sign-posts and never travel the road. The dear fathers wished by their writing, to lead us to the Scriptures, but we so use them as to be led away from the Scriptures, though the Scriptures alone are our vineyard in which we ought all to work and toil.⁵⁹

I hope it will be plain, by the focus and development of the following three chapters, that this is the design of the book: From the “Sovereign Joy” of grace discovered by Augustine to the “Sacred Study” of Scripture in the life of Luther to the “Divine Majesty of the Word” in the life and preaching of Calvin, the aim is that the glorious gospel of God’s all-satisfying, omnipotent grace will be savored, studied, and spread for the joy of all peoples—in a never-ending legacy of sovereign joy. And so may the Lord come quickly.

⁵⁹Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1943), 13.

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose. . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honor, though not in the eyes of men who see all honor in themselves. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.

St. Augustine

Confessions

Sovereign Joy

*The Liberating Power of Holy Pleasure in the Life
and Thought of St. Augustine*

The End of an Empire

On August 26, 410, the unthinkable happened. After nine hundred years of impenetrable security, Rome was sacked by the Gothic army led by Alaric. St. Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, was in Palestine at the time and wrote, “If Rome can perish, what can be safe?”¹ Rome did not perish immediately. It would be another sixty-six years before the Germans deposed the last emperor. But the shock waves of the invasion reached the city of Hippo, about 450 miles southwest of Rome on the coast of North Africa, where Augustine was the bishop. He was fifty-five years old and in the prime of his ministry. He would live another twenty years and die on August 28, 430, just as eighty thousand invading Vandals were about to storm the city. In other words, Augustine lived in one of those tumultuous times between the shifting of whole civilizations.

He had heard of two other Catholic bishops tortured to death in the Vandal invasion, but when his friends quoted to him the words of Jesus, “Flee to another city,” he said, “Let no one dream of holding our ship so cheaply, that the sailors, let alone the Captain, should desert her in time of peril.”² He had been the bishop of Hippo since 396 and, before that,

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 289.

² Ibid., 425.

had been a preaching elder for five years. So he had served the church for almost forty years and was known throughout the Christian world as a God-besotted, biblical, articulate, persuasive shepherd of his flock and a defender of the faith against the great doctrinal threats of his day, mainly Manichaeism,³ Donatism,⁴ and Pelagianism.⁵

Unparalleled and Paradoxical Influence

From this platform in North Africa, and through his remarkable faithfulness in formulating and defending the Christian faith for his generation, Augustine shaped the history of the Christian church. His influence in the Western world is simply staggering. Adolf Harnack said that he was the greatest man the church has possessed between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer.⁶ Benjamin Warfield argued

³ From age nineteen to twenty-eight, Augustine was enamored with Manichaeism, but then became disillusioned with it and a great opponent in philosophical debate (Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin [New York: Penguin, 1961], 71 [IV, 1]). Manichaeism was a heretical sect of Christianity founded by Mani, who claimed to have received an inspired message in Mesopotamia and had been executed in AD 276 by the Persian government. The “new” Christianity he founded had sloughed off the Old Testament as unspiritual and disgusting. In Mani’s Christianity, “Christ did not need the witness of the Hebrew prophets: He spoke for Himself, directly to the soul, by His elevated message, by His Wisdom and His miracles. God needed no other altar than the mind” (Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 43–44). The problem of evil was at the heart of Augustine’s involvement with the Manichees. “They were dualists: so convinced were they that evil could not come from a good God, that they believed that it came from an invasion of the good—the ‘Kingdom of Light’—by a hostile force of evil, equal in power, eternal, totally separate—the ‘Kingdom of Darkness’” (p. 47). “The need to save an untarnished oasis of perfection within himself formed, perhaps, the deepest strain of [Augustine’s] adherence to the Manichees. . . . ‘For I still held the view that it was not I who was sinning, but some other nature within me’” (p. 51). Augustine gives his own explanation of why he was taken by the heresy of Manichaeism: “I thought that you, Lord God who are the Truth, were a bright, unbounded body and I a small piece broken from it” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 89 [V, 16]). “I thought that whatever had no dimension in space must be absolutely nothing at all. . . . I did not realize that the power of thought, by which I formed these images, was itself something quite different from them. And yet it could not form them unless it were itself something, and something great enough to do so” (p. 134 [VII, 1]). “Because such little piety as I had compelled me to believe that God, who is good, could not have created an evil nature, I imagined that there were two antagonistic masses, both of which were infinite, yet the evil in a lesser and the good in a greater degree” (p. 104 [V, 10]). From this entanglement Augustine went on to be a great apologist for the true biblical vision of one transcendent, sovereign God.

⁴ Donatism “was a Christian movement of the 4th and 5th centuries, which claimed that the validity of the sacraments depends on the moral character of the minister. It arose as a result of the consecration of a bishop of Carthage in AD 311. One of the three consecrating bishops was believed to be a *traditor*, that is, one of the ecclesiastics who had been guilty of handing over their copies of the Bible to the oppressive forces of the Roman emperor Diocletian. An opposition group of 70 bishops, led by the primate of Numidia, formed itself into a synod at Carthage and declared the consecration of the bishop invalid. They held that the church must exclude from its membership persons guilty of serious sin, and that therefore no sacrament could rightly be performed by a *traditor*. The synod excommunicated the Carthaginian bishop when he refused to appear before it. Four years later, upon the death of the new bishop, the theologian Donatus the Great became bishop of Carthage; the movement later took its name from him” (“Donatism,” Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 99 [Microsoft Corporation, 1993–1998]). In this controversy we see Augustine’s allegiance to the sacramental character of the Catholic Church that we raised questions about in the introduction. See pages 30–31.

⁵ The teachings of Pelagius will be explained later in this chapter.

⁶ Adolf Harnack, “Monasticism and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine,” in Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R, 1956), 306.

that through his writings Augustine “entered both the Church and the world as a revolutionary force, and not merely created an epoch in the history of the Church, but . . . determined the course of its history in the West up to the present day.”⁷ He had “a literary talent . . . second to none in the annals of the Church.”⁸ “The whole development of Western life, in all its phases, was powerfully affected by his teaching.”⁹ The publishers of *Christian History* magazine simply say, “After Jesus and Paul, Augustine of Hippo is the most influential figure in the history of Christianity.”¹⁰

The most remarkable thing about Augustine’s influence is the fact that it flows into radically opposing religious movements. He is cherished as one of the greatest fathers of the Roman Catholic Church,¹¹ and yet it was Augustine who “gave us the Reformation”—not only because “Luther was an Augustinian monk, or that Calvin quoted Augustine more than any other theologian . . . [but because] the Reformation witnessed the ultimate triumph of Augustine’s doctrine of grace over the legacy of the Pelagian view of man.”¹² “Both sides in the controversy [between the Reformers and the (Catholic) counter-Reformation] appealed on a huge scale to texts of Augustine.”¹³

Henry Chadwick tries to get at the scope of Augustine’s influence by pointing out that “Anselm, Aquinas, Petrarch (never without a pocket copy of the *Confessions*), Luther, Bellarmine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard all stand in the shade of his broad oak. His writings were among the favourite books of Wittgenstein. He was the *bête noire* [“object of aversion”] of Nietzsche. His psychological analysis anticipated parts of Freud: he first discovered the existence of the ‘sub-conscious.’”¹⁴

There are reasons for this extraordinary influence. Agostino Trapè gives an excellent summary of Augustine’s powers that make him incomparable in the history of the church:

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 312.

⁹Ibid., 310.

¹⁰*Christian History* 6, no. 3 (1987): 2.

¹¹“The Council of Orange adopted his teaching on grace, the Council of Trent his teaching on original sin and justification, and Vatican I his teaching on the relations between reason and faith. In our own day, Vatican II has made its own his teaching on the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the human person.” Agostino Trapè, *Saint Augustine: Man, Pastor, Mystic* (New York: Catholic Book, 1986), 333.

¹²R. C. Sproul, “Augustine and Pelagius,” *Tabletalk*, June 1996: 11. “Pelagian view of man” means the view that man has the final and ultimate self-determining ability to overcome his own slavery to sin. See later in this chapter on the views of Pelagius.

¹³Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2.

¹⁴Ibid., 3.

Augustine was . . . a philosopher, theologian, mystic, and poet in one. . . . His lofty powers complemented each other and made the man fascinating in a way difficult to resist. He is a philosopher, but not a cold thinker; he is a theologian, but also a master of the spiritual life; he is a mystic, but also a pastor; he is a poet, but also a controversialist. Every reader thus finds something attractive and even overwhelming: depth of metaphysical intuition, rich abundance of theological proofs, synthetic power and energy, psychological depth shown in spiritual ascents, and a wealth of imagination, sensibility, and mystical fervor.¹⁵

Visiting the Alps without Seeing Them All

Virtually everyone who speaks or writes on Augustine has to disclaim thoroughness. Benedict Groeschel, who has written a recent introduction to Augustine, visited the Augustinian Heritage Institute adjacent to Villanova University where the books on Augustine comprise a library of their own. Then he was introduced to Augustine's five million words on computer. He speaks for many of us when he says,

I felt like a man beginning to write a guidebook of the Swiss Alps. . . . After forty years I can still meditate on one book of the *Confessions* . . . during a week-long retreat and come back feeling frustrated that there is still so much more gold to mine in those few pages. I, for one, know that I shall never in this life escape from the Augustinian Alps.¹⁶

But the fact that no one can exhaust the Alps doesn't keep people from going there, even simple people. If you wonder where to start in your own reading, almost everyone would say to start with the *Confessions*, the story of Augustine's life up through his conversion and the death of his mother. The other four "great books" are *On Christian Doctrine*; the *Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope and Love*, which, Warfield says, is Augustine's "most serious attempt to systematize his thought";¹⁷ *On the Trinity*, which gave the Trinity its definitive formulation; and *The City of God*, which was Augustine's response to the collapsing of the empire and his attempt to show the meaning of history.

The brevity of the tour of these Alps is drastically out of proportion to the greatness of the subject and its importance for our day. It is rele-

¹⁵ Trapè, *Saint Augustine*, 335.

¹⁶ Benedict J. Groeschel, *Augustine: Major Writings* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 1–2.

¹⁷ Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, 307.

vant for our ministries—whether vocational minister or layperson—and especially for the advance of the Biblical Reformed faith in our day. The title of this chapter is “Sovereign Joy: The Liberating Power of Holy Pleasure in the Life and Thought of St. Augustine.” Another subtitle might have been “The Place of Pleasure in the Exposition and Defense of Evangelicalism.” Or another might have been, “The Augustinian Roots of Christian Hedonism.”¹⁸

Augustine’s Life in Overview

Augustine was born in Thagaste, near Hippo, in what is now Algeria, on November 13, 354. His father, Patricius, a middle-income farmer, was not a believer. He worked hard to get Augustine the best education in rhetoric that he could, first at Madaura, twenty miles away, from age eleven to fifteen; then, after a year at home, in Carthage from age seventeen to twenty. His father was converted in 370, the year before he died, when Augustine was sixteen. He mentions his father’s death only in passing one time in all his vast writings. This is all the more striking when you consider the many pages spent on the grief of losing friends.

“As I grew to manhood,” he wrote, “I was inflamed with desire for a surfeit of hell’s pleasures. . . . My family made no effort to save me from my fall by marriage. Their only concern was that I should learn how to make a good speech and how to persuade others by my words.”¹⁹ In particular, he said that his father “took no trouble at all to see how I was growing in your sight [O God] or whether I was chaste or not. He cared only that I should have a fertile tongue.”²⁰ The profound disappointment in his father’s care for him silenced Augustine’s tongue concerning his father for the rest of his life.

Before he left for Carthage to study for three years, his mother warned him earnestly “not to commit fornication and above all not to seduce any man’s wife.”²¹ “I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust. . . . My real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul. I was not aware of this hunger.”²² “I was willing to steal, and steal I did, although I was not

¹⁸ Christian Hedonism is the name I give to the vision of God and Christian life and ministry unfolded especially in *Desiring God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011).

¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 44 (II, 2).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45 (II, 3).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 46 (II, 3).

²² *Ibid.*, 55 (III, 1).

compelled by any lack.”²³ “I was at the top of the school of rhetoric. I was pleased with my superior status and swollen with conceit. . . . It was my ambition to be a good speaker, for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity.”²⁴ He took a concubine in Carthage and lived with this same woman for fifteen years and had one son by her, Adeodatus.

He became a traditional schoolmaster teaching rhetoric for the next eleven years of his life—age nineteen to thirty—and then spent the last forty-four years of his life as an unmarried monk and a bishop. Another way to say it would be that he was profligate until he was thirty-one and celibate until he was seventy-five. But his conversion was not as sudden as is often thought.

When he was nineteen, in the “cauldron of Carthage,” swollen with conceit and utterly given over to sexual pleasures, he read Cicero’s *Hortensius*, which for the first time arrested him by its content and not its rhetorical form. Hortensius exalted the quest for wisdom and truth above mere physical pleasure.

It altered my outlook on life. It changed my prayers to you, O Lord, and provided me with new hopes and aspirations. All my empty dreams suddenly lost their charm and my heart began to throb with a bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth. I began to climb out of the depths to which I had sunk, in order to return to you. . . . My God, how I burned with longing to have wings to carry me back to you, away from all earthly things, although I had no idea what you would do with me! For yours is the wisdom. In Greek the word “philosophy” means “love of wisdom,” and it was with this love that the *Hortensius* inflamed me.²⁵

This was nine years before his conversion to Christ, but it was utterly significant in redirecting his reading and thinking more toward truth rather than style, which is not a bad move in any age.

For the next nine years he was enamored by the dualistic teaching called Manichaeism, until he became disillusioned with one of its leaders when he was twenty-eight years old.²⁶ In his twenty-ninth year he moved from Carthage to Rome to teach, but was so fed up

²³ Ibid., 47 (II, 4).

²⁴ Ibid., 58 (III, 3).

²⁵ Ibid., 58–59 (III, 4).

²⁶ Ibid., 71 (IV, 1).

with the behavior of the students that he moved to a teaching post in Milan, Italy, in 384. This was providential in several ways. There he would discover the Platonists, and there he would meet the great bishop Ambrose. He was now thirty years old and still had his son and his concubine—a tragic, forgotten woman whom he never once names in all his writings.

In the early summer of 386, he discovered the writings of Plotinus, a neo-Platonist²⁷ who had died in 270. This was Augustine's second conversion after the reading of Cicero eleven years earlier. He absorbed the Platonic vision of reality with a thrill. This encounter, Peter Brown says, "did nothing less than shift the center of gravity of Augustine's spiritual life. He was no longer identified with his God [as in Manichaeism]: This God was utterly transcendent."²⁸

But he was still in the dark. You can hear the influence of his Platonism in his assessment of those days: "I had my back to the light and my face was turned towards the things which it illumined, so that my eyes, by which I saw the things which stood in the light, were themselves in darkness."²⁹

Now came the time for the final move, the move from Platonism to the apostle Paul, through the tremendous impact of Ambrose, who was fourteen years older than Augustine. "In Milan I found your devoted servant the bishop Ambrose. . . . At that time his gifted tongue never tired of dispensing the richness of your corn, the joy of your oil, and the sober intoxication of your wine. Unknown to me, it was you who led me to him, so that I might knowingly be led by him to you."³⁰

Augustine's Platonism was scandalized by the biblical teaching that "the Word was made flesh." But week in and week out he would listen to Ambrose preach. "I was all ears to seize upon his eloquence, I also began to sense the truth of what he said, though only gradually."³¹ I thrilled with love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from

²⁷Neoplatonism was founded by Plotinus (AD 205–270), whose system was based chiefly on Plato's theory of ideas. Plotinus taught that the Absolute Being is related to matter by a series of emanations through several agencies, the first of which is *nous*, or pure intelligence. From this flows the soul of the world; from this, in turn, flow the souls of humans and animals, and finally, matter. Augustine would find numerous elements in this philosophy that do not cohere with biblical Christianity—for example, its categorical opposition between the spirit and matter. There was an aversion to the world of sense, and thus the necessity of liberation from a life of sense through rigorous ascetic discipline.

²⁸Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 100.

²⁹Augustine, *Confessions*, 88 (V, 16).

³⁰Ibid., 107 (V, 13).

³¹Ibid., 108 (V, 14).

you . . . and, far off, I heard your voice saying I am the God who IS. I heard your voice, as we hear voices that speak to our hearts, and at once I had no cause to doubt.”³²

But this experience was not true conversion. “I was astonished that although I now loved you . . . I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world . . . as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not yet able to eat it.”³³

Notice here the emergence of the phrase “enjoyment of my God.” Augustine now conceived of the quest of his life as a quest for a firm and unshakable enjoyment of the true God. This would be utterly determinative in his thinking about everything, especially in his great battles with Pelagianism near the end of his life forty years from this time.

He knew that he was held back now not by anything intellectual, but by sexual lust: “I was still held firm in the bonds of woman’s love.”³⁴ Therefore the battle would be determined by the kind of pleasure that triumphed in his life. “I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you [notice the battlefield: How shall I find strength to enjoy God more than sex?], but I could not find this means until I embraced the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ.”³⁵

His mother, Monica, who had prayed for him all his life, had come to Milan in the spring of 385 and had begun to arrange a proper marriage for him with a well-to-do Christian family there. This put Augustine into a heart-wrenching crisis and set him up for even deeper sin, even as his conversion was on the horizon. He sent his concubine of fifteen years back to Africa, never to live with her again. “The woman with whom I had been living was torn from my side as an obstacle to my marriage and this was a blow which crushed my heart to bleeding, because I loved her dearly. She went back to Africa, vowing never to give herself to any other man. . . . But I was too unhappy and too weak to imitate this example set me by a woman. . . . I took another mistress, without the sanction of wedlock.”³⁶

³²Ibid., 146 (VII, 10).

³³Ibid., 152 (VII, 17).

³⁴Ibid., 158 (VIII, 1).

³⁵Ibid., 152 (VII, 18).

³⁶Ibid., 131 (VI, 15).

The History-Making Conversion

Then came one of the most important days in church history. “O Lord, my Helper and my Redeemer, I shall now tell and confess to the glory of your name how you released me from the fetters of lust which held me so tightly shackled and from my slavery to the things of this world.”³⁷ This is the heart of his book, the *Confessions*, and one of the great works of grace in history, and what a battle it was. But listen carefully how it was won. (It’s recorded more fully in Book VIII of the *Confessions*.)

Even this day was more complex than the story often goes, but to go to the heart of the battle, let’s focus on the final crisis. It was late August 386. Augustine was almost thirty-two years old. With his best friend, Alypius, he was talking about the remarkable sacrifice and holiness of Antony, an Egyptian monk. Augustine was stung by his own bestial bondage to lust, when others were free and holy in Christ.

There was a small garden attached to the house where we lodged. . . . I now found myself driven by the tumult in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle in which I was my own contestant. . . . I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity. I was dying a death that would bring me life. . . . I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. . . . I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees.³⁸

But he began to see more clearly that the gain was far greater than the loss, and by a miracle of grace he began to see the beauty of chastity in the presence of Christ.

I was held back by mere trifles. . . . They plucked at my garment of flesh and whispered, “Are you going to dismiss us? From this moment we shall never be with you again, for ever and ever.” . . . And while I stood trembling at the barrier, on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continence in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross over and to hesitate no more. She stretched out loving hands to welcome and embrace me.³⁹

³⁷Ibid., 166 (VIII, 6).

³⁸Ibid., 170–71 (VIII, 8).

³⁹Ibid., 175–76 (VIII, 11).

So now the battle came down to the beauty of Continence and her tenders of love versus the trifles that plucked at his flesh.

I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes. . . . In my misery I kept crying, “How long shall I go on saying ‘tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?” . . . All at once I heard the singsong voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain “Take it and read, take it and read.” At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall.⁴⁰

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting . . . seized [the book of Paul’s epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: “Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites” (Romans 13:13–14). I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.⁴¹

The Unchosen Place and the Providence of God

The experience of God’s grace in Augustine’s own conversion set the trajectory for his theology of grace that brought him into conflict with Pelagius and made him the source of the Reformation a thousand years later. And this theology of sovereign grace was a very self-conscious theology of the triumph of joy in God.

He was baptized the next Easter 387, in Milan by Ambrose. That autumn his mother died, a very happy woman because the son of her tears was safe in Christ. In 388 (at almost thirty-four), he returned to Africa with a view to establishing a kind of monastery for him and his friends, whom he called “servants of God.” He had given up the plan

⁴⁰Ibid., 177–78 (VIII, 12).

⁴¹Ibid., 178 (VIII, 12).

for marriage and committed himself to celibacy and poverty—that is, to the common life with others in the community.⁴² He hoped for a life of philosophical leisure in the monastic way.

But God had other plans. Augustine's son, Adeodatus, died in 389. The dreams of returning to a quiet life in his hometown of Thagaste evaporated in the light of eternity. Augustine saw that it might be more strategic to move his monastic community to the larger city of Hippo. He chose Hippo because they already had a bishop, so there was less chance of his being pressed to take on that role. But he miscalculated—like Calvin more than a thousand years later. The church came to Augustine and essentially forced him to be the priest and then the bishop of Hippo, where he stayed for the rest of his life.

In a sermon much later, Augustine said to his people, “A slave may not contradict his Lord. I came to this city to see a friend, whom I thought I might gain for God, that he might live with us in the monastery. I felt secure, for the place already had a bishop. I was grabbed. I was made a priest . . . and from there, I became your bishop.”⁴³

And so, like so many in the history of the church who have left an enduring mark, he was thrust (at the age of thirty-six) out of a life of contemplation into a life of action. The role of bishop included settling legal disputes of church members and handling many civil affairs. “He would visit jails to protect prisoners from ill-treatment; he would intervene . . . to save criminals from judicial torture and execution; above all, he was expected to keep peace within his ‘family’ by arbitrating in their lawsuits.”⁴⁴

Augustine established a monastery on the grounds of the church and for almost forty years raised up a band of biblically saturated priests and bishops who were installed all over Africa, bringing renewal to the churches. He saw himself as part of the monastery, following the strict vegetarian diet and poverty and chastity. There was an absolute prohibition on female visitors. There was too much at stake, and he knew his weakness. He never married. When he died, there was no will because all his possessions belonged to the common order. His legacy was his writings, the clergy he trained, and his monastery.

⁴² Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 116.

⁴³ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 195.

The Triumph of Grace as “Sovereign Joy”

Now, back to the triumph of grace in Augustine’s life and theology. Augustine experienced this grace and developed it self-consciously as a theology of “sovereign joy.” R. C. Sproul says that the church today is very largely in a Pelagian captivity.⁴⁵ Perhaps the prescription for the cure is for the church, and especially the lovers of God’s sovereignty, to recover a healthy dose of Augustine’s doctrine of “sovereign joy.” Far too much Christian thinking and preaching in our day (including Reformed thinking and preaching) has not penetrated to the root of how grace actually triumphs—namely, through joy—and therefore is only half-Augustinian and half-biblical and half-beautiful.

The life and thought of Augustine bring us back to this root of joy. Pelagius was a British monk who lived in Rome in Augustine’s day and taught that “though grace may facilitate the achieving of righteousness, it is not necessary to that end.”⁴⁶ He denied the doctrine of original sin and asserted that human nature at its core is good and able to do all it is commanded to do. Therefore Pelagius was shocked when he read in Augustine’s *Confessions*, “Give me the grace [O Lord] to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! . . . O holy God . . . when your commands are obeyed, it is from you that we receive the power to obey them.”⁴⁷ Pelagius saw this as an assault on human goodness and freedom and responsibility; if God has to give what he commands, then we are not able to do what he commands and are not responsible to do what he commands, and the moral law unravels.

Augustine had not come to his position quickly. In his book *On the Freedom of the Will*, written between 388 and 391, he defended the freedom of the will in a way that caused Pelagius to quote Augustine’s own book against him in later life.⁴⁸ But by the time Augustine wrote the *Confessions* ten years later, the issue was settled. Here is what he wrote (this may be one of the most important paragraphs for understanding the heart of Augustine’s thought, and the essence of Augustinianism):

⁴⁵ “What would Luther think of the modern heirs of the Reformation? My guess is that he would write on the modern church’s captivity to Pelagianism,” R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy Over Free Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 21.

⁴⁶ Sproul, “Augustine and Pelagius,” 13.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 236 (X, 31).

⁴⁸ “So, paradoxically the great opponent of Augustine’s old age had been inspired by those treatises of the young philosopher, in which Augustine had defended the freedom of the will against a Manichaean determinism” (Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 149).

During all those years [of rebellion], where was my free will? What was the hidden, secret place from which it was summoned in a moment, so that I might bend my neck to your easy yoke? . . . How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of *those fruitless joys* which I had once feared to lose! . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the *sovereign joy*. [There's the key phrase and the key reality for understanding the heart of Augustinianism.] You drove them from me and took their place, you who are *sweeter than all pleasure*, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honor, though not in the eyes of men who see all honor in themselves. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.⁴⁹

This is Augustine's understanding of grace. *Grace is God's giving us sovereign joy in God that triumphs over joy in sin.* In other words, God works deep in the human heart to transform the springs of joy so that we love God more than sex or anything else. Loving God, in Augustine's mind, is never reduced to deeds of obedience or acts of willpower. He never makes the mistake of quoting John 14:15 ("If you love Me, you will keep My commandments") and claiming that love *is* the same as keeping Christ's commandments, when the text says that keeping Christ's commandments *results from* loving Christ. "If you love, *then* me you will obey." Nor does he make the mistake of quoting 1 John 5:3 ("For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome") and overlook the point that loving God means keeping his commandments *in such a way* that his commandments are not burdensome. Loving God is being so satisfied in God and so delighted in all that he is for us that his commandments cease to be burdensome. Augustine saw this. And we need him badly today to help us recover the root of all Christian living in the triumphant joy in God that dethrones the sovereignty of laziness and lust and greed.

For Augustine, loving God is always a delighting in God, and in other things only for God's sake. He defines it clearly in *On Christian Doctrine* (III.x.16). "I call 'charity' [i.e., love for God] the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God."⁵⁰ Loving God

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 181 (IX, 1), emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 88. He adds, "'Cupidity' is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God."

is always conceived of essentially as delighting in God and in anything else for his sake.

Augustine analyzed his own motives down to this root. Everything springs from delight. He saw this as a universal: “Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy. There is no man who does not desire this, and each one desires it with such earnestness that he prefers it to all other things; whoever, in fact, desires other things, desires them for this end alone.”⁵¹ This is what guides and governs the will, namely, what we consider to be our delight.

But here’s the catch that made Pelagius so angry. Augustine believed that it is not in our power to determine what this delight will be.

Who has it in his power to have such a motive present to his mind that his will shall be influenced to believe? Who can welcome in his mind something which does not give him delight? But who has it in his power to ensure that something that will delight him will turn up? Or that he will take delight in what turns up? If those things delight us which serve our advancement towards God, that is due not to our own whim or industry or meritorious works, but to the inspiration of God and to the grace which he bestows.⁵²

So saving grace, converting grace, in Augustine’s view, is *God’s giving us a sovereign joy in God* that triumphs over all other joys and therefore sways the will. The will is free to move toward whatever it delights in most fully, but it is not within the power of our will to determine what that *sovereign joy* will be. Therefore Augustine concludes,

A man’s free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall begin to become known to him, unless he also take delight in and feel a love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. Now, in order that such a course may engage our affections, God’s “love is shed abroad in our

⁵¹ Thomas A. Hand, *Augustine on Prayer* (New York: Catholic Book, 1986), 13 (sermon 306). See Augustine, *Confessions*, 228 (X, 21): “Without exception we all long for happiness . . . all agree that they want to be happy. . . . They may all search for it in different ways, but all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is, joy.”

⁵² T. Kermit Scott, *Augustine: His Thought in Context* (New York: Paulist, 1995), 203 (*To Simplician*, II, 21). In another place he said, “Clearly it is in vain for us to will unless God have mercy. But I don’t know how it could be said that it is vain for God to have mercy unless we willingly consent. If God has mercy, we also will, for the power to will is given with the mercy itself. It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. If we ask whether a good will is a gift of God, I should be surprised if anyone would venture to deny that. But because the good will does not precede calling, but calling precedes the good will, the fact that we have a good will is rightly attributed to God who calls us, and the fact that we are called cannot be attributed to our selves” (p. 201 [*To Simplician* II, 12]).

hearts” not through the free-will which arises from ourselves, but “through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us” (Romans 5:5).⁵³

In 427, he looked back over a lifetime of thought on this issue and wrote to Simplician, “In answering this question I have tried hard to maintain the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God prevailed.”⁵⁴ Controversy was Augustine’s daily vocation. Near the end of his life, he listed over eighty heresies that he had fought against.⁵⁵ Why this defensive labor, in view of his deepest longing for joy in God? He gives one answer in the *Confessions*: “It is indeed true that the refutation of heretics gives greater prominence to the tenets of your Church [O Lord] and the principles of sound doctrine. For parties there must needs be, so that those who are true metal may be distinguished from the rest.”⁵⁶

But there was a deeper reason for his long engagement in the Pelagian controversy. When he was asked by his friend Paulinus why he kept on investing so much energy in this dispute with Pelagius, even as a man in his seventies, he answered, “First and foremost because no subject [but grace] gives me greater pleasure. For what ought to be more attractive to us sick men, than grace, grace by which we are healed; for us lazy men, than grace, grace by which we are stirred up; for us men longing to act, than grace, by which we are helped?”⁵⁷ This answer has all the more power when you keep in mind that all the healing, stirring, helping, enabling grace that Augustine revels in is *the giving of a compelling, triumphant joy*. Grace governs life by giving a supreme joy in the supremacy of God.

Augustine is utterly committed to the moral accountability of the human will, even though the will is ultimately governed by the delights of the soul that are ordered finally by God. When pressed for an explanation, he is willing, in the end, to rest with Scripture in a “profound mystery.” This can be seen in the following two quotes:

Now, should any man be for constraining us to examine into this profound mystery, why this person is so persuaded as to yield, and that person is not,

⁵³Ibid., 208 (*Spirit and Letter*, V).

⁵⁴Ibid., 211 (*To Simplician*, II, 1).

⁵⁵Augustine wrote *On Heresies* during 428–429, and it remains unfinished because of his death. In it he lists over eighty heresies from Simon Magus to the Pelagians (Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 35–56).

⁵⁶Augustine, *Confessions*, 153–54 (VII, 19).

⁵⁷Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 355 (Epistle 186, XII, 139).

there are only two things occurring to me, which I should like to advance as my answer: “O the depth of the riches!” (Romans 11:33) and “Is there unrighteousness with God?” (Romans 9:14). If the man is displeased with such an answer, he must seek more learned disputants: but let him beware lest he find presumptuousness.⁵⁸

Let this truth, then, be fixed and unmovable in a mind soberly pious and stable in faith, that there is no unrighteousness with God. Let us also believe most firmly and tenaciously that God has mercy on whom he will and that whom he will he hardeneth, that is, he has or has not mercy on whom he will. Let us believe that this belongs to a certain hidden equity that cannot be searched out by any human standard of measurement, though its effects are to be observed in human affairs and earthly arrangements.⁵⁹

The fact that grace governs life by giving a supreme joy in the supremacy of God explains why the concept of Christian freedom is so radically different in Augustine than in Pelagius. For Augustine, freedom is to be so much in love with God and his ways that the very experience of choice is transcended. The ideal of freedom is not the autonomous will poised with sovereign equilibrium between good and evil. The ideal of freedom is to be so spiritually discerning of God’s beauty, and to be so in love with God, that one never stands with equilibrium between God and an alternate choice. Rather, one transcends the experience of choice and walks under the continual sway of sovereign joy in God. In Augustine’s view, the self-conscious experience of having to contemplate choices was a sign not of the freedom of the will, but of the disintegration of the will. The struggle of choice is a necessary evil in this fallen world until the day comes when discernment and delight unite in a perfect apprehension of what is infinitely delightful, namely, God.

What follows from Augustine’s view of grace as the giving of a sovereign joy that triumphs over “lawless pleasures”⁶⁰ is that the entire Christian life is seen as a relentless quest for the fullest joy in God. He said, “The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire.”⁶¹ In other words, the key to Christian living is a thirst and a hunger for God. And

⁵⁸ Scott, *Augustine: His Thought in Context*, 209–10 (*Spirit and Letter*, LX).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 212 (*To Simplician*, II, 16).

⁶⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 44 (II, 2). “You were always present, angry and merciful at once, strewing the pangs of bitterness over all my lawless pleasures to lead me on to look for others unallied with pain. You meant me to find them nowhere but in yourself, O Lord, for you teach us by inflicting pain, you smite so that you may heal, and you kill us so that we may not die away from you.”

⁶¹ Hand, *Augustine on Prayer*, 20 (*Treatise on 1 John 4:6*).

one of the main reasons people do not understand or experience the sovereignty of grace and the way it works through the awakening of sovereign joy is that their hunger and thirst for God is so small. The desperation to be ravished for the sake of worship and holiness is unintelligible. Here's the goal and the problem as Augustine saw it:

The soul of men shall hope under the shadow of Thy wings; they shall be made drunk with the fullness of Thy house; and of the torrents of Thy pleasures Thou wilt give them to drink; for in Thee is the Fountain of Life, and in Thy Light shall we see the light? Give me a man in love: he knows what I mean. Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal country. Give me that sort of man: he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he just does not know what I am talking about.⁶²

These words from Augustine should make our hearts burn with renewed longing for God. And they should help us see why it is so difficult to display the glory of the gospel to so many people. The reason is that so many do not long for anything very much. They are just coasting. They are not passionate about anything. They are “cold,” not just toward the glory of Christ in the gospel, but toward everything. Even their sins are picked at rather than swallowed with passion.

The Place of Prayer in the Pursuit of Joy

The remedy from God's side for this condition of “coldness,” of course, is the gracious awakening of a sovereign joy. But on the human side, it is prayer and the display of God himself as infinitely more desirable than all creation. It is not a mere stylistic device that all 350 pages of the *Confessions* are written as a prayer. Every sentence is addressed to God. This is astonishing. It must have required enormous literary discipline not to fall into some other form. The point of this discipline is that Augustine is utterly dependent on God for the awakening of love to God. And it is no coincidence that the prayers of Augustine's mother, Monica, pervade the *Confessions*. She pled for him when he would not plead for himself.⁶³

Augustine counsels us, “Say with the psalmist: ‘One thing I have

⁶²Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 374–75 (*Tractatus in Joannis evangelium*, 26, 4).

⁶³See notes 67, 69, 70.

asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: 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 meditate in His temple' (Psalm 27:4)." Then he says, "In order that we may attain this happy life, he who is himself the true Blessed Life has taught us to pray."⁶⁴ Augustine shows us the way he prayed for the triumph of joy in God: "O Lord, that I may love you [freely], for I can find nothing more precious. Turn not away your face from me, that I may find what I seek. Turn not aside in anger from your servant, lest in seeking you I run toward something else. . . . Be my helper. Leave me not, neither despise me, O God my Saviour."⁶⁵

His mother's praying became the school where he learned deep things about Jesus's words in John 16:24, "Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full." Prayer is the path to fullness of sovereign joy. But, oh, what a strange and circuitous path! Monica had learned patience in the pain of long-unanswered prayers. For example, her husband, Patricius, was unfaithful to her. But Augustine recalls in the *Confessions* that "her patience was so great that his infidelity never became a cause of quarreling between them. For she looked to you to show him mercy, hoping that chastity would come with faith. . . . In the end she won her husband for you [O Lord] as a convert in the very last days of his life on earth."⁶⁶

So it would prove to be with her son. She "shed more tears [over] my spiritual death," Augustine said, "than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son."⁶⁷ When her son was a Manichaeon heretic, Monica sought help from an old bishop. His counsel was not what she wanted to hear: He too had been a Manichee once, but had seen his folly. "Leave him alone," he said. "Just pray to God for him. From his own reading he will discover his mistakes and the depth of his profanity. . . . Leave me and go in peace. It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost."⁶⁸

At the age of sixteen in 371, soon after his father's death, Augustine sneaked away from his mother in Carthage and sailed to Rome. "Dur-

⁶⁴ Hand, *Augustine on Prayer*, 25 (Letter 130, 15).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 194–95.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 68 (III, 11).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 69–70 (III, 12).

ing the night, secretly, I sailed away, leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers.”⁶⁹ How were these prayers answered? Not the way Monica hoped at that time. Only later could she see the truth of Jesus’s words worked out in her life—that praying is the path to deepest joy. “And what did she beg of you, my God, with all those tears, if not that you would prevent me from sailing? But you did not do as she asked you. Instead, in the depth of your wisdom, you granted the wish that was closest to her heart. You did with me what she had always asked you to do.”⁷⁰

Later, just after his conversion, he went to tell his mother what God had done in answer to her prayers:

Then we went and told my mother [of my conversion], who was overjoyed. And when we went on to describe how it had all happened, she was jubilant with triumph and glorified you, who are powerful enough, and more than powerful enough, to carry out your purpose beyond all our hopes and dreams. For she saw that you had granted her far more than she used to ask in her tearful prayers and plaintive lamentations. You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer desired a wife or placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith, where you had shown me to her in a dream years before. And you turned her sadness into rejoicing, into joy far fuller than her dearest wish, far sweeter and more chaste than any she had hoped to find in children begotten of my flesh.⁷¹

Such was the lesson Augustine learned from the unremitting travail of his mother’s prayers. Not what she thought she wanted in the short run, but what she most deeply wanted in the long run—God gave her “joy far fuller than her dearest wish.” “Ask, and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24).

Displaying the Superior Delight of Knowing God

But alongside prayer, the remedy for people without passion and without hunger and thirst for God is to display God himself as infinitely more desirable—more satisfying—than all creation. Augustine’s zeal for the souls of men and women was that they might come to see the beauty of God and love him. “If your delight is in souls, love them in

⁶⁹Ibid., 101 (V, 8).

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., 178–79 (VIII, 12).

God . . . and draw as many with you to him as you can.”⁷² “You yourself [O God] are their joy. Happiness is to rejoice in you and for you and because of you. This is true happiness and there is no other.”⁷³

So Augustine labored with all his spiritual and poetic and intellectual might to help people see and feel the all-satisfying supremacy of God over all things.

But what do I love when I love my God? . . . Not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God. And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfillment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God.⁷⁴

Few people in the history of the church have surpassed Augustine in portraying the greatness and beauty and desirability of God. He is utterly persuaded by Scripture and experience “that he is happy who possesses God.”⁷⁵ “You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you.”⁷⁶ He will labor with all his might to make this God of sovereign grace and sovereign joy known and loved in the world.

You are ever active, yet always at rest. You gather all things to yourself, though you suffer no need. . . . You grieve for wrong, but suffer no pain. You can be angry and yet serene. Your works are varied, but your purpose is one and the same. . . . You welcome those who come to you, though you never lost them. You are never in need yet are glad to gain, never covetous yet you exact a return for your gifts. . . . You release us from our debts, but you lose nothing thereby. You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you!⁷⁷

⁷²Ibid., 82 (IV, 12).

⁷³Ibid., 228 (X, 22).

⁷⁴Ibid., 211–12 (X, 6).

⁷⁵Hand, *Augustine on Prayer*, 17 (*On the Happy Life*, 11).

⁷⁶Augustine, *Confessions*, 21 (I, 1).

⁷⁷Ibid., 23 (I, 4).

What a preacher Augustine became in his passion not to be “silent” about the all-satisfying pleasures at God’s right hand! “Can any man say enough when he speaks of you?” He explained to his own congregation how his preaching came to be: “I go to feed [myself] so that I can give you to eat. I am the servant, the bringer of food, not the master of the house. I lay out before you that from which I also draw my life.”⁷⁸ This was his way of study: he sought for soul-food that he might feed himself on God’s “holy Delight” and then feed his people.

Even his ability—and his hearers’ ability—to see the truth of Scripture was governed partially by the delight he took in what he found there. He would always tell his readers that they must “look into the Scriptures [with] the eyes of their heart on its heart.” This means that one must look with love on what one only partially sees: “It is impossible to love what is entirely unknown, but when what is known, if even so little, is loved, this very capacity for love makes it better and more fully known.”⁷⁹ In other words, loving, or delighting in, what we know of God in Scripture will be the key that opens Scripture further. So study and preaching were, for Augustine, anything but detached and impartial, as scholarship is so often conceived today.

He explained to the great Bible scholar Jerome that he could therefore never be a “disinterested” scholar, because “if I do gain any stock of knowledge [in the Scriptures], I pay it out immediately to the people of God.”⁸⁰ And what was it that he showed them and fed them? It was the very joy that he himself found in God: “The thread of our speech comes alive through the very joy we take in what we are speaking about.”⁸¹ That was the key to his preaching, and the key to his life—he could not cease seeking and speaking about the sovereign joy in God that had set him free by the power of a superior satisfaction.

The Unchanged Relevance of Grace as “Sovereign Joy”

The implications of Augustine’s experience and his theology of sovereign joy are tremendously relevant not only for preaching but also for evangelism. What had happened to him can happen to others because every human heart is the same in this way. “I am not alone in this desire

⁷⁸Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 252 (Epistle 73, II, 5).

⁷⁹Ibid., 279 (*Tractatus in Joannis evangelium*, 96, 4).

⁸⁰Ibid., 252 (Epistle 73, II, 5).

⁸¹Ibid., 256.

[for the blessed state of happiness], nor are there only a few who share it with me: without exception we all long for happiness. . . . All agree that they want to be happy. . . . They may all search for it in different ways, but all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is, joy.”⁸² This is a great common ground for doing evangelism in every age. Deeper than all “felt needs” is the real need: God. Not just God experienced without emotional impact, but rather God experienced as “holy Delight.” “You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you.”⁸³ This peace is the presence of a profound happiness. “He is happy who possesses God.”⁸⁴ Not because God gives health, wealth, and prosperity, but because God *is* our soul’s joyful resting place. To make this known and experienced through Jesus Christ is the goal of evangelism and world missions.

Augustine’s doctrine of delight in God is the root of all Christian living. He brings it to bear on the most practical affairs of life and shows that every moment in every circumstance we stand on the brink between the lure of idolatry and the delight of seeing and knowing God. Perhaps he erred on the side of asceticism at times in an overreaction to the lust of his youth. But in principle he seemed to get it right. For example, his chief rule on using the things of the world so that they are gratefully received as God’s gifts but do not become idols is expressed in this prayer: “He loves thee too little who loves anything together with thee, which he loves not for thy sake.”⁸⁵ He illustrates:

Suppose, brethren, a man should make a ring for his betrothed, and she should love the ring more wholeheartedly than the betrothed who made it for her. . . . Certainly, let her love his gift: but, if she should say, “The ring is enough. I do not want to see his face again” what would we say of her? . . . The pledge is given her by the betrothed just that, in his pledge, he himself may be loved. God, then, has given you all these things. Love Him who made them.⁸⁶

Instead of minimizing the greatness and the beauty of this world, Augustine admired it and made it a means of longing for the City of

⁸² Augustine, *Confessions*, 228 (X, 21).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21 (I, 1).

⁸⁴ Hand, *Augustine on Prayer*, 17 (*On the Happy Life*, 11).

⁸⁵ Augustine, quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 54.

⁸⁶ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 326 (*Tractate on the Epistle of John*, 2:11).

which this is all a shadow. “From His gifts, which are scattered to good and bad alike in this, our most grim life, let us, with His help, try to express sufficiently what we have yet to experience.”⁸⁷ He ponders the wonders of the human body and the “gratuitous ornament of a male beard,” and even turns admiringly to pagan scholarship: “Who can possibly do full justice to the intellectual brilliance displayed by philosophers and heretics in defending their errors and incorrect opinions?”⁸⁸

His delight in nature comes out in this regard as he, perhaps, looks out over the Bay of Hippo: “There is the grandeur of the spectacle of the sea itself, as it slips on and off its many colors like robes, and now is all shades of green, now purple, now sky-blue. . . . And all these are mere consolations for us, for us unhappy, punished men: they are not the rewards of the blessed. What can these be like then, if such things here are so many, so great, and of such a quality?”⁸⁹ Augustine’s relentless focus on the City of God did not prevent him from seeing the beauties of this world and enjoying them for what they are—good gifts of God pointing us ever to the Giver and the superior joys of his presence. We need to heed the unremitting call of Augustine to be free from the ensnaring delights of this world, not because they are evil in themselves, but because so few of us use them as we ought: “If the things of this world delight you, praise God for them but turn your love away from them and give it to their Maker, so that in the things that please you may not displease him.”⁹⁰

Augustine’s vision of salvation through Jesus Christ and of living the Christian life is rooted in his understanding and experience of grace—the divine gift of triumphant joy in God. The power that saves and sanctifies is the work of God deep beneath the human will to transform the springs of joy so that we love God more than sex or seas or scholarship or food or friends or fame or family or money. Grace is the key because it is free and creates a new heart with new delights that govern the will and the work of our lives. “It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

If it is true, as R. C. Sproul says, that today “we have not broken free

⁸⁷Ibid., 328 (*City of God*, XXII, 21, 26).

⁸⁸Ibid., 329 (*City of God*, XXII, 24, 160).

⁸⁹Ibid., 329 (*City of God*, XXII 24, 175).

⁹⁰Augustine, *Confessions*, 82 (IV, 12).

from the Pelagian captivity of the church”⁹¹—a captivity that Augustine warred against for so many years for the sake of sovereign joy—then we should pray and preach and write and teach and labor with all our might to break the chain that holds us captive. Sproul says, “We need an Augustine or a Luther to speak to us anew lest the light of God’s grace be not only overshadowed but be obliterated in our time.”⁹² Yes, we do. But we also need tens of thousands of ordinary pastors and laypeople who are ravished with the extraordinary power of joy in God.

And we need to rediscover Augustine’s peculiar slant—a very biblical slant—on grace as the free gift of sovereign joy in God that frees us from the bondage of sin. We need to rethink our Reformed doctrine of salvation so that every limb and every branch in the tree is coursing with the sap of Augustinian delight. We need to make plain that *total depravity* is not just badness, but blindness to beauty and deadness to joy; and *unconditional election* means that the completeness of our joy in Jesus was planned for us before we ever existed; and that *limited atonement* is the assurance that indestructible joy in God is infallibly secured for us by the blood of the covenant; and *irresistible grace* is the commitment and power of God’s love to make sure we don’t hold on to suicidal pleasures, and to set us free by the sovereign power of superior delights; and that the *perseverance of the saints* is the almighty work of God to keep us, through all affliction and suffering, for an inheritance of pleasures at God’s right hand forever.

This note of sovereign, triumphant joy is a missing element in too much Christian (especially Reformed) theology and worship. Maybe the question we should pose ourselves is whether this is so because we have not experienced the triumph of sovereign joy in our own lives. Can we say the following with Augustine?

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of *those fruitless joys* which I had once feared to lose! . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the *sovereign joy*. You drove them from me and took their place. . . . O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.⁹³

Or are we in bondage to the pleasures of this world so that, for all our talk about the glory of God, we love television and food and

⁹¹ R. C. Sproul, “Augustine and Pelagius,” 52.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 181 (IX, 1), emphasis added.

sleep and sex and money and human praise just like everybody else? If so, let us repent and fix our faces like flint toward the Word of God. And let us pray: O Lord, open my eyes to see the sovereign sight that in your presence is fullness of joy and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11). Grant, O God, that we would live the legacy of sovereign joy.

