The Swan is Not Silent

Sovereign Joy in the Life and Thought of St. Augustine

1998 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors

By John Piper February 3, 1998

On August 26, 410, the unthinkable happened. After 900 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?" Rome did not perish immediately. It would be another 66 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 55 years old and in the prime of his ministry. He would live another 20 years and die on August 28, 430, just as 80,000 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." He had been the bishop of Hippo since 396 and, before that, was a preaching elder for five years. So he had served the church for almost 40 years, and was known throughout the Christian world as a God-besotted, Biblical, articulate, persuasive shepherd of his flock and defender of the faith against the great threats of his day, mainly Manichaeism, Donatism, and Pelagianism.

Four years before he died, he had handed over the administrative duties of the church in Hippo to his assistant Eraclius. At the ceremony Eraclius stood to preach, as the old man 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."

If only Eraclius could have looked down over sixteen centuries at the enormous influence of Augustine, he would understand why I have entitled this message, "The Swan is Not Silent." He was not silent then and he is not today. He has not been silent for 1600 years.

The influence of Augustine 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. Benjamin Warfield argued 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." He had "a literary talent . . . second to none in the annals of the Church." "The whole development of Western life, in all its phases, was powerfully affected by his teaching." 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."

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 greatest fathers of the Catholic Church,

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." "Both sides in the controversy [between the reformers and the counter-reformation] appealed on a huge scale to texts of Augustine."

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 *bte noire* ["night beast" = pet aversion] of Nietzsche. His psychological analysis anticipated parts of Freud: he first discovered the existence of the 'sub-conscious.'"

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:

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.

I think that is accurate and unexaggerated. That is what I have found.

Virtually everyone who speaks or writes on Augustine has to disclaim thoroughness. Benedict Groeschel, who has written the most 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.

But the fact that no one can exhaust the Alps doesn't keep people from going there, even simple people. And so I have ventured to go, and I invite you to go with me. If you wonder where to start in your own reading, I think almost everyone would say start with the *Confessions,* the story of his life up through his conversion and the death of his mother. The other four "great books" are *On Christian Doctrine* (397-426); the *Enchiridion*: *on Faith, Hope and Love* (421), which, Warfield says, is "his most serious attempt to systematize his thought;" *On the Trinity* (395-420), which gave the Trinity its definitive formulation; and *The City of God*, (413-426), which was Augustine's response to the collapsing of the empire, and his attempt to show the meaning of history.

I invite you to take a very short tour with me in these Alps. But the brevity of the tour is way out of proportion to the greatness of the subject and its importance for our day. What I have seen has been for me tremendously significant for my own life and theology and ministry. I believe it is relevant for your ministry and especially for the advance of the Biblical Reformed faith in our day. I have called my message: "Sovereign Joy in the Life and Thought of St. Augustine." Another possible title might have been "The Place of Pleasure in the Exposition and Defense of Evangelical Calvinism." Or another might have been, "The Augustinian Roots of Christian Hedonism."

Let's orient ourselves by a brief overview of Augustine's life. He 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 11 to 15; then, after a year at home, in Carthage from 17 to 20. His father was converted in 370, the year before he died, when Augustine was 16. He mentions his father's death only in passing one time in his writings, even though he spends many pages 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." In particular, he said 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."

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." "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." "I was willing to steal, and steal I did, although I was not compelled by any lack." "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." He took a concubine in Carthage and lived with this same woman for 15 years and had one son by her, Adeodatus.

In a snapshot of the rest of his life, he became a traditional schoolmaster teaching rhetoric for the next eleven years of his life – age 19 to 30 – and then spent the last 44 years of his life as monk and a bishop. Another way to say it would be that he was profligate till he was 31 and celibate till he was 75. But his conversion was not as sudden as is often thought.

When he was 19 in the "cauldron of Carthage," swollen with conceit and given over utterly to sexual pleasures, he read Cicero's *Hortensius*, which for the first time arrested him for 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.

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 enamoured by the dualistic teaching called Manichaeism, until he became disillusioned with one of its leaders when he was 28 years old. In his 29th year he moved to Rome from Carthage to teach, but was so fed up with the behavior of the students that he moved to a teaching post in Milan, Italy, in 384, which was providential in several ways. There he would discover the Platonists and there he would meet the great bishop Ambrose. He was now 30 years old and still had his son and his concubine whom he never once names in all his writings.

In the early summer of 386 he discovered the writings of Plotinus, a neo-Platonist 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."

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."

Now came the time for the final move, the move from Platonism to the apostle Paul, through the tremendous impact of Ambrose who was 14 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."

Augustine's Platonism was scandalized by the Biblical teaching of "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." "I thrilled with love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from 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."

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."

What I want you to notice here is 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 will be utterly determinative in his thinking about everything, especially in his great final 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." 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 battlefront: 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."

His mother Monica, who had prayed for him all his life, had come to Milan in the spring of 385 and 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 15 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."

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." 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. (And read it for yourself in Book VIII.)

> 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 32 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.
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> 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.

But he began to see more clearly that the gain was far greater than the loss, and by 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.

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.
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> 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 in 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.

I hasten to sum up the rest of Augustine's outer life, because the great message for us is in Augustine's own theological working out of this triumph of joy in God over joy in sex. The experience of God's grace in his 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. That is the message I want us to hear. But first an overview of the rest of his life.

He was baptized the next Easter, 387, in Milan by Ambrose. That autumn his mother died, a very happy woman that the son of her tears was safe in Christ. In 388 (at almost 34) 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 for marriage and committed himself to celibacy and poverty – that is, the common life with others in the community. He hoped for a life of philosophical leisure in the monastic way.

But God had other plans. His son died in 389. The dreams of the homestead evaporated in the light of eternity. Augustine got the idea 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 over a thousand years later. The church came to Augustine and basically 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."

And so, like so many in the history of the church who left an enduring mark, at the age of 36 he was thrust 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."

He 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, his clergy and his monastery.

Now, back to the triumph of grace in Augustine's life and theology. I said above that Augustine experienced this grace and developed it self-consciously as a theology of "sovereign joy." My thesis is this: R. C. Sproul is right that the church today is in a Pelagian captivity, and that the prescription for the cure is for the Reformed community to recover a healthy dose of Augustine's doctrine of "sovereign joy." (I don't know if Sproul would agree with the second part of the thesis.) My assumption is that far too much of Reformed thinking and preaching in our day 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.

Let me try to unpack this for you. 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." 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." 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. But by the time Augustine wrote the *Confessions* ten years later the issue was settled. Here is what he wrote. I think it is one of the most important paragraphs for understanding the heart of Augustinianism:

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.

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. It 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." Loving 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." 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. For Augustine, 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.

So saving grace, converting grace, for Augustine, 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 hearts" not through the free-will which arises from ourselves, but "through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us" (Romans 5:5).

Near the end of his life 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." 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 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?" And this answer has all the more power when you keep in mind that all this 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 souls which 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, 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.
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> 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.

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 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. For Augustine 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. 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" 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." In other words, the key to Christian living is a thirst and a hunger for God. And 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. . . .

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. The point 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.

Augustine counsels us, "Say with the psalmist: 'One thing I ask of the Lord, this I seek: To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, that I may gaze on the loveliness of the Lord and contemplate 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." He 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."

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 come to see the beauty of God and love him. "If your delight is in souls, love them in God . . . and draw as many with you to

him as you can." "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.

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.

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." "You made us for yourself, and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you." 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!

If it is true, as R.C. Sproul says, that today "we have not broken free from the Pelagian captivity of the church," 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." Yes, we do. But we also need tens of thousands of ordinary pastors like you and me, who are ravished with the extraordinary sovereignty 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 soteriology 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, but will 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 Reformed theology and Reformed worship. And it may be that the question we should pose ourselves in conclusion 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.

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 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 in prayer: 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 for evermore (Psalm 16:11).

NOTE: If there were time, I would develop with Augustine's help the implications of the sovereignty of joy for other areas of life and ministry. With all our life and ministry growing from the tap root of sovereign joy, we need to go back and rethink preaching and evangelism and prayer and providence and controversy and Biblical interpretation and what it means to live as aliens in the City of Man awaiting the City of God. Augustine's relentless vision of God-centered joy permeates his teaching on all these things, and we will do well to let him be our guide. But that will have to be for another time.

Source: http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1474_The_Swan_is_Not_Silent/