
[St. Augustine: 10 things to know and share](#)

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August 28th is the memorial of St. Augustine, bishop and doctor of the Church.

He's one of the most influential Church Fathers and theologians in history.

Who was he and why is he so famous?

Here are 10 things to know and share . . .

1) When and where was he born?

St. Augustine was born in A.D. 354 in Thagaste, Numidia (modern day [Souk Ahras](#), Algeria) into an upper-class family.

His father—Patricius—was a pagan, though he converted to Christianity on his deathbed.

His mother—St. Monica—was a Christian and raised Augustine in the faith, though he was not baptized until he was an adult. He was of mixed-race ancestry, with ancestors including [Phoenicians](#), [Berbers](#), and [Latins](#). He considered himself [Punic](#).

Latin seems to have been his first language.

2) How did he become aware of sin?

As a boy he became conscious of sin in a special way when he participated in a pointless act of theft. This made a profound impression on him and he later wrote about and regretted it.

In his spiritual autobiography, the [Confessions](#), he described the incident:

In a garden nearby to our vineyard there was a pear tree, loaded with fruit that was desirable neither in appearance nor in taste.

Late one night—to which hour, according to our pestilential custom, we had kept up our street games—a group of very bad youngsters set out to shake down and rob this tree.

We took great loads of fruit from it, not for our own eating, but rather to throw it to the pigs; even if we did eat a little of it, we did this to do what pleased us for the reason that it was forbidden.

Behold my heart, O Lord, behold my heart upon which you had mercy in the depths of the pit.

Behold, now let my heart tell you what it looked for there, that I should be evil without purpose and that there should be no cause for my evil but evil itself.

Foul was the evil, and I loved it [Confessions 2:4:9].

3) What other sins did he commit in youth?

St. Augustine participated in what St. Paul delicately calls “youthful passions” (2 Tim. 2:22).

He wrote about this in the Confessions, noting a prayer of his at the time that later became famous and reflects the experience of many people. He said:

I, miserable young man, supremely miserable even in the very outset of my youth, had entreated chastity of You [O God], and said, “Grant me [chastity](#) and [continence](#) . . . but not yet.”

For I was afraid lest You should hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence, which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished [Confessions8:7].

When he was 19, he began a long-term affair with a woman. We do not know her name, because Augustine deliberately did not record it, perhaps out of concern for her reputation.

She was not of Augustine's social class, and he never married her, perhaps because St. Monica objected to him marrying a woman of a lower class.

She did, however, give Augustine a son, who was named Adeodatus (Latin, “By God Given” or, more colloquially, “Gift of God”).

This naming indicates an awareness that, no matter how a child is conceived, and even if the parents did something very wrong, every child is a gift of God.

4) How did he develop religiously?

Despite his Christian upbringing, Augustine left abandoned the Faith and became a Manichean, which crushed his mother.

[Manicheanism](#) was a Gnostic, dualistic sect founded in the A.D. 200s by an Iranian man named [Mani](#).

5) Thus far, Augustine has stolen pears just to be naughty, had a long-term affair, fathered a child outside of wedlock, and abandoned the Christian Faith. Things aren't going so well for him on the becoming-a-saint front. How did he turn it around?

He took a position teaching rhetoric in Milan, Italy and, with the encouragement of his mother, began to have more contact with Christians and Christian literature.

One day, in the summer of 386, he heard a childlike voice chanting "Tolle, lege" (Latin, "Take, read").

He took this as a divine command and opened the Bible, randomly, to Romans 13:13-14, which reads:

Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Applying this to his own life, Augustine was cut to the heart, and his conversion now began in earnest.

He was baptized, along with Adeodatus, at the next Easter Vigil.

St. Ambrose of Milan baptized both of them.

Incidentally, St. Ambrose may have [the strangest life story of any of the Church Fathers](#).

6) So now he's a baptized layman. How did he become a Church Father?

In 388, Augustine, Monica, and Adeodatus prepared to return to North Africa.

Unfortunately, Monica only made it as far as Ostia, the port of Rome, where she passed on to her heavenly reward.

Back in Africa, Adeodatus passed away also.

This left Augustine alone on the family property. He sold almost all his possessions and gave the money to the poor. He did, however, retain the family house, which he turned into a monastery.

In 391, he was ordained a priest of the diocese of [Hippo](#) (now [Annaba](#), Algeria).

In 395, he became the city's coadjutor bishop and then its bishop. As bishop, he wrote extensively (in fact, he wrote [prodigiously](#)), and the value of his writings was such that he became a Church Father.

7) How did he die?

Augustine passed to his heavenly reward on August 28, 430 (hence his feast day of August 28).

At the time, Hippo was being sacked by Arian [Vandals](#)—meaning actual, historical Vandals (the Germanic tribe), not just people committing the petty crime of vandalism.

Unfortunately, after his death the Vandals burned the city, but they left Augustine's cathedral and library untouched.

8) How did he become a saint?

He was [canonized](#) by popular acclaim, as the custom of papal canonization had not yet arisen.

9) How did he become a doctor of the Church—and why?

Together with Gregory the Great, Ambrose, and Jerome, Augustine was one of the original four [doctors of the Church](#). He was proclaimed a doctor by Pope Boniface VIII in 1298.

He was named a doctor because of the extraordinarily high value of his writings, which include major theological, philosophical, and spiritual works.

Among his most famous works are:

- [The Confessions](#) (his spiritual autobiography)
- [The City of God](#)
- [On Christian Doctrine](#)
- [Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love](#)

This is just a tiny selection of what he wrote though. The guy could not stop writing!

A large selection of his writing is online [here](#).

10) Is it true that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has a special attachment to the thought of St. Augustine?

Yes. In his autobiography, [Milestones](#), he wrote:

[Augustine] in his Confessions had struck me with the power of all his human passion and depth. By contrast, I had difficulties in penetrating the thought of Thomas Aquinas, whose crystal-clear logic seemed to me to be too closed in on itself, too impersonal and ready-made.

Later, as pope, he said:

As you know, I too am especially attached to certain Saints: among them (in addition to St Joseph and St Benedict, whose names I bear) is St Augustine whom I have had the great gift to know, so to speak, close at hand through study and prayer and who has become a good “travelling companion” in my life and my ministry [[General Audience, Aug. 25, 2010](#)].

BONUS ITEM:

The name [Augustine](#) is a form of the title [Augustus](#), which was given to Roman emperors to indicate their greatness and venerableness. (That’s what “Augustus” means.)

Despite the high-sounding connotations of the name “Augustus,” the name “Augustine” has given us a name with much more colloquial connotations: [Gus](#).

The name of Augustine’s diocese—Hippo—also has interesting resonances. To English speakers, it sounds like a contraction of “hippopotamus,” but in Greek it called to mind a very different animal.

“Hippo” comes from the Greek word for horse.

“Augustine of Hippo” thus can be read as “Gus from Horse.”

That Old West sound seems appropriate, since as one of the Latin Fathers, Augustine was from the really Old West. [Did God Deceive Jeremiah?](#)

The readings you heard at Mass on O. T. 22nd Sunday say that God “duped” Jeremiah. Wait . . . what? How could an all-holy God “dupe” or deceive anybody? What’s going on here?

Let’s Start with the Text: The readings for the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A), contain a passage from Jeremiah, which reads, in part: “You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped; you were too strong for me, and you triumphed. All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me [Jer. 20:7].

“Duped”? Okay, let’s start by noting that “duped” is a tin-eared translation. The word is too colloquial and comes of as jarring in this context. How does the verse read in other translations? Here it is in the RSV:CE: O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; every one mocks me.

Hm. It doesn’t have the jarring lurch into the colloquial, but it still has carries the implication of God actively doing something evil by deceiving someone.

The Language of Direct Attribution: Now, the Old Testament does have a mode of language in which—sometimes—everything that happens is attributed directly to God. This happens, for example, when 2 Samuel 24:1 says God moved David to take a census that he shouldn’t have, whereas 1 Chronicles 21:1 says the devil moved him to do it. 2 Samuel is using the language of direct attribution, where the bad thing that happened (David’s census) is attributed directly to God, whereas 1 Chronicles uses a more refined mode of language that recognizes the bad thing that happened was prompted by the devil, with the implication that God allowed it. The language of direct attribution is an ancient way of showing the fact that everything happens under God’s providence, but this mode of language does not distinguish between things that God intends and actively causes and those things that he merely allows. When this mode of language is in use, bad things are spoken of in a way that directly attributes them to God. In reality, God is all-holy and does not do anything evil. He tolerates evil with a view toward bringing good out of it. Thus the Catechism states: The fact that God permits physical and even moral evil is a mystery that God illuminates by his Son Jesus Christ who died and rose to vanquish evil. Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if he did not cause a good to come from that very evil, by ways that we shall fully know only in eternal life [CCC 324].

But, particularly in the Old Testament, they didn’t always make this kind of distinction and had a way of speaking that attributed everything—good or bad—directly to divine agency. Is that’s what is happening in Jeremiah 20:7? Did Jeremiah get into the role of prophet not knowing what would happen to him and the suffering he would experience, so now he is using that mode of language? That would be one way of solving the problem, but there are others . . . The

Language of Subjective Feeling: Scripture has another mode of language in which a person speaks his feelings without necessarily implying that what he says is to be taken literally. He may be expressing his feelings using hyperbole (i.e., exaggeration to make a point). A jubilant example of this occurs in Psalm 108:2, where the psalmist cries: Awake, harp and lyre; I will awaken the dawn! This means that the psalmist is really jubilant and wants to go on and on praising God with song. It need not literally mean that he will stay up all night praising God. (Indeed, I don't have any evidence that Psalm 108 was used exclusively in all-night prayer services.) It certainly does not mean that the psalmist will sing so long and so loud that he will literally awaken the sun from its slumber and cause it to come up. We thus might suppose that Jeremiah is doing something similar, only with a negative emotion instead of a positive one. Perhaps he didn't realize what he was getting into by becoming a prophet and now he feels like he was deceived. On this theory, he would just be "venting" to get it out of his system, without it being literally the case that God tricked him. And there is another way of looking at the text . . .

Look Closely at the Verb and the Context: The verb being translated as "dupe/deceive" is pathah, and while it can mean these things, it also has other meanings, and in this context it may well have one of those. Writing in the Word Biblical Commentary (vol. 26, Jeremiah 1-25), Joel Drinkard writes: The verb pathah is variously translated as "deceive, seduce, persuade." . . . [D]espite the common English translation of pathah as deceive (KJV, RSV), the context does not indicate that Yahweh has in any way deceived Jeremiah: from his call experience on, Yahweh has warned Jeremiah of the opposition he would encounter. The context rather suggests the meaning of persuasion. Clines and Gunn suggest that the word pathah deals especially with attempts, not necessarily success, in persuading, hence the title of their article, "You Tried to Persuade Me...." However, in this passage, the context makes clear that Yahweh was quite successful: Yahweh persuaded and Jeremiah was fully, completely persuaded. Yahweh's persuasion overpowered (khazaq) Jeremiah, and Yahweh overcame (yakol) [comment on 20:7, bibliographic references omitted].

An example of where God warned Jeremiah about the trials he would face as a prophet is found right at the beginning of the book, in Jeremiah 1:18:19: And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you." So while it could be that the text is using the language of direct attribution or the language of subjective feeling, we don't have to go that far. It is also possible—and, in view of God's warnings to Jeremiah, perhaps even probable—that the verb is just being used in the sense of "persuade" rather than "deceive" or (cringe!) "dupe."

[Hah! A Tiny Biblical Mystery Solved \(Jimmy Akins\)](#)

I just realized the solution to a minor biblical mystery. There is a famous passage in 1 Corinthians, where Paul is rebuking the Corinthian Christians for forming factions around different Church figures, and he writes: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name (1 Cor. 1:13-15).

Then he writes: I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else (1 Cor. 1:16). Paul clearly forgot about having baptized the household of Stephanas, but something jogged his memory. What was it? At the very end of the epistle, we read about a group of Corinthians who had come to visit Paul and were with him at the time. He writes: Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia [i.e., Greece], and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer. I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such men (1 Cor. 16:15-18).

A-hah! Stephanas was with Paul at the time the letter was written! That gives us a very good idea what—or rather, who—jogged Paul's memory: Stephanas himself! In all likelihood, Paul was dictating away, he mentioned baptizing Crispus and Gaius and then moved on, and then Stephanas piped up with something like, "Um, you baptized my household as well." And so, having been reminded, Paul mentioned them as well and—lest he forgot anyone else—said he didn't remember if he baptized anyone else. Heh. I love little discoveries like that—and imagining the human dynamics at play in the event, such as Stephanas's embarrassment at having to correct Paul and Paul being embarrassed that he forgot Stephanas's household and possibly others.