

# Confessions of a Self-Professed Pessimist

by Ben Palpant

I guess when Yogi Berra said, “It ain’t over till it’s over,” he was right. I should have paid more mind to the wise guy. And now that I’m thinking about it in terms of our kids, I think the great Yogi may have accidentally struck a biblical cord. If there is one thing that I keep having to relearn it is this: “it ain’t over till it’s over.”

Sometimes I wonder when my students will finally act like adults. I wonder when my own children will stop acting like monkeys. But this is all my failure to live by faith. I keep forgetting that God has a long term plan and that it is a good plan. I keep forgetting that what I might term a hopeless cause is quite possibly the very thing God is looking to use in His grand plan. It is a silly mindset now that I am writing about it, but I suppose we are all guilty of it to some degree or another. And so I write this as a reminder to me and a reminder to you to look beyond the bend, to live by faith instead of by sight, and to remember: it ain’t over. . .yet.

We find this reinforced in Scripture in many places but we also find it in the pages of history. The life of the great Augustine of Hippo is one of these reminders to live by faith. His own early years were such that he suffered from what he called “the worms of regret” for much of his life. He was prone to folly, prone to fall in with bad company, and all his sin was well-disguised from both his parents and his teachers. He and his friends used to snicker at their conquests and at the knowledge that they successfully pulled the wool over the eyes of their authorities.

I’m sure he was like many young men who very nobly say, “yes, sir” and then mock and jibe the teacher’s apparent naivety.

If one were to judge the life of Augustine by his first twenty-five years, it would be a sorry story of lust, deceit, cavalier rebellion, and high-handed mockery. He would have fallen into the pit of history’s ditch, off the road of greatness, and been forgotten there. But we do not judge him according to his early life because Yogi was right: it ain’t over yet. We know Augustine as a “philosophical and theological genius of the first order, towering like a pyramid above his age, and looking down commandingly upon succeeding centuries. He had a mind uncommonly fertile and deep, bold

seeds into the ground. These seeds would later flourish like a mighty plant whose blooms would be seen far across the plains of time. And this gives us great hope to live by faith, not by sight. Augustine’s mother certainly did so.

Augustine was born to a heathen father, Patricius, and a believing mother, Monica. While his father set out to make Augustine a great man of the world, his mother prayed fervently and shed tears for him that he might in due time become a man of God. A child of such maternal faithfulness could not be lost and in him we find verification that the child of one unbelieving parent is sanctified, set apart, holy, and belongs to God through the faith of one believing parent (I Cor.

---

*If one were to judge the life  
of Augustine by his first  
twenty-five years, it would  
be a sorry story . . .*

---

and soaring; and with it, what is better, a heart full of Christian love and humility.”<sup>1</sup>

Was he always like that? Emphatically, no! His youth was a wasteland of sin. But God, the Almighty worker of wonders, plowed up the crusty ground and planted

7:14). This is potent stuff and not to be forgotten: though Augustine was living a life of rebellion, his life was set apart by the faith of Monica, “one of the noblest women in the history of Christianity, of a highly intellectual and spiritual cast, of fervent piety, most tender affection, and all conquering love.”<sup>2</sup> She went to war for her son’s soul and God

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 990.

<sup>1</sup> Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity, Vol. 3*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 997.

*continued on page 2*

## Confessions of a Self-Professed Pessimist

*continued from page 1*

blessed her for it. She believed I Cor. 7:14 and she believed the promises of God and so Monica was able to look at her son with the eyes of faith. Monica looked at her child with a far-reaching gaze, seeing beyond the momentary fear and panic. But let us not delude ourselves into thinking that the eyes of faith never shed tears. She looked beyond the momentary fear and panic, but it was, no denying, still fear and panic. In fact, she wept on Augustine's behalf, "more than mothers are accustomed to weep for the bodily deaths of their children."<sup>3</sup> Monica believed God's promises regarding her child, but she saw that her child was spiritually dead and so she wept for him. In this, she is no different than the rest of us who weep over our children's sin, but here there is a very important difference: we often weep out of fear, but Monica was "buoyed up with hope, though no less zealous in her weeping and mourning; and she did not cease to bewail my case before thee, in all the hours of her supplication."<sup>4</sup>

We need, like Augustine's mother, to elongate our scope and vision for the sake of Christ's great name and for the sake of our children. Unfortunately, many parents are raising their children in a defensive mode, hoping only to survive the turbulent years of

pre-adolescence and adolescence. I have difficulty believing that Monica raised her son defensively, however much she may have at times stumbled and struggled as to how most effectively to raise her son for Christ. She believed God to be true and she daily worked to bury the Adam within her son. The first Adam had the upper hand in Augustine for much of his early life until he heard a child chanting Scripture and the second Adam quite suddenly grabbed Augustine by the throat.

When Christ grabs hold, He does not let go; in fact, He fosters in His own a great and growing vibrancy of love toward the Father and a tenderness of heart toward the Spirit. And this longing for the Father bursts with the colors of Christmas. So was it with Augustine, whose longings were such that

*When Christ grabs hold, He does not let go; in fact, He fosters in His own a great and growing vibrancy of love toward the Father and a tenderness of heart toward the Spirit*

he cried out in his *Confessions*, "I have loved Thee late! Thou Beauty, so old and so new; I have loved Thee late! And lo! Thou wast within, but I was without, and was seeking Thee there." And still more he says, "I had been deafened by the clanking of the chains of my mortality, the

punishment for my soul's pride, and I wandered farther from thee, and thou didst permit me to do so. I was tossed to and fro, and wasted, and poured out, and I boiled over in my fornications—and yet thou didst hold thy peace, O my tardy Joy! Thou didst still hold thy peace, and I wandered still farther from thee into more and yet more barren fields of sorrow, in proud dejection and restless lassitude. . . for thy omnipotence is not far from us, even when we are far from thee. . . Thou wast always by me, mercifully angry and flavoring all my unlawful pleasures with bitter discontent." It is, perhaps, the most beautiful thing to see a sinner fall to his knees and cry out to God in repentance. And though it may be a tardy joy, still it is joy.

This is joy that we long for our children. And this is the very thing for which we hope when our vision is elongated. We look forward to seeing our children live for Christ because they are sanctified, set apart. This is not presumption since presumption is believing in what God has *not* promised. No, this is hopeful, offensive, child rearing and all discipline, exhortation, training,

and praise are backed by the words of Isaiah: "And my elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the Lord, and their

*continued on next page*

3 St. Augustine. *The Confessions*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 51.

4 Ibid., 52.

## Confessions . . .

*continued from page 2*

offspring with them” (Isaiah 65:22b and 23).

It was verses like these that bolstered up Monica when her son was far from God. She remembered that her labor was not in vain. She remembered that Augustine was the descendant of the blessed of the Lord. She remembered that God is faithful, though we are not, and that His purposes are good and right and true. How often, how sadly, we forget. This forgetfulness rears its ugly head in the way parents, including myself, discipline and train their children. Children are shrewd; they know when discipline is motivated by fear, anger, frustration, and shame. They also know that this is not godly discipline. Godly discipline is hopeful discipline; it is confident discipline, assured of fruit. It happens quickly, it is over quickly, and neither parent nor child has lost self-control in the process. Such discipline is beautiful, though painful, and particularly when it is sealed by the act of prayer, together, when all the tears are done. Discipline is about restoration—restoring the wandering sheep to the fold of God.

That is why faithful parents and faithful teachers are not, in general, frustrated folks. Neither should they be surprised at sin. We are prone to wander, prone to live with the “worms of guilt.” So, this entire article is the confession of

a pessimist who is trying to molt his pessimist skin. For much too long my eyes have been turned downward, sometimes inward, and very often backward, and I grow frustrated and fearful. This, my brothers, is unbelief. And though sin abounds, Christians should be optimistic none-the-less, because God is faithful to bless the labors of His faithful ones. So, let us be faithful like Monica.

I wonder when my own children will stop acting like monkeys. I keep forgetting that what I might term a hopeless cause is quite possibly the very thing God is looking to use in His grand plan. And of all people to forget this truth, I should be the last. Repentance came late for me and now I am witness to this sweet truth: “It ain’t over until it’s over.”

So, be not defensive minded. Think like a Christian; optimistically raise your children for Christ, remembering that they are but youngsters, newly treading upon the road of faith, and continue to see your children as future Edwards, Augustines, Mathers, and Wheatleys. Continue to bury the Adam with sound and faithful and judicious discipline, knowing that it is Christ who “works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). He is a good God who loves to remind us that “it ain’t over until it’s over.”

*Ben Palpant and his wife, Kristen, live in the beautiful Northwest. They have four wild and wonderful children who thankfully take after their mother most of the time. He has taught literature and writing for the past nine years at The Oaks: A Classical and Christian Academy in Spokane, Washington, and holds a BA from Whitworth College. Ben spends most of his time as a human Mt. Everest, and does his writing after the children are too exhausted to climb anymore. His current writing project (a book he is writing for kicks and for anybody willing to publish it) is an apology for Christian bibliophilia.*

## 2008 Regional Teacher Training Events

**June 23-25**

*Austin, TX*

Latin for Teachers  
[www.latinforteachers.com](http://www.latinforteachers.com)

**July 14-17**

*Moscow, ID*

Logos School  
Teacher Training  
[www.logosschool.com](http://www.logosschool.com)

**July 21-23**

*Lancaster, PA*

Veritas Press  
Teacher Training  
[www.veritaspress.com](http://www.veritaspress.com)

**July 21-25**

*Lancaster, PA*

Latin, Omnibus I, II  
In-A-Week

**Various Dates**

*Online Only*

Latin, Omnibus I

*In-A-Week*

[www.veritaspress.com](http://www.veritaspress.com)

**July 22-25**

*Millersville, MD*

Rockbridge Academy  
Teacher Training  
[www.rockbridge.org](http://www.rockbridge.org)

**August 6-8**

*Online Only*

Veritas Press  
Teacher Training  
[www.veritaspress.com](http://www.veritaspress.com)