



Rev. Chris Taylor - 11.17.19

"Five Smooth Stones Sermon Series: Study"

2 Kings 22:8-13 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Born in North Africa in 354, Augustine was a brilliant student from the start, characterized by a searching mind and a longing to answer life's great questions. At seventeen he began an affair with a young woman that would last fifteen years. By the time he was eighteen he was already a father. As powerful as his mind was, it was more than matched his other appetites. He had a well-earned reputation for his carousing and sexual exploits.

He became a teacher, starting in North Africa then moving to Rome and then finally Milan. It was there in Milan that he found himself drawn to the preaching and character of the bishop of that city. His name was Ambrose; one of the great patriarchs of our faith.

It was during this time that Augustine became increasingly and ashamed of his inability to control his appetites. Talking with some friends one day, he rushed from the room in despair and found his way to nearby garden. Sitting in a quiet nook he heard the voice of a little girl singing, "tolle, lege" – "take up and read". He thought at first the song was related to some kind of children's game, but he couldn't remember ever having heard such a song before.

Then, thinking that it might actually be a command from God, he picked up a Bible and read the first passage he came to; a line from Paul's epistle to the Romans,

Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh. --Romans 13: 13-14

He would later write that as he read that line it was as if his whole heart was suddenly flooded with light. He turned to Christ and turned away from his life of sin. The following Easter Vigil, in 387, he and his son were baptized by Ambrose. Augustine went on to become Bishop of Hippo, and became one of the most influential theologians the church has ever known, second only in his impact to the Apostle Paul.

Eleven hundred years after Augustine's baptism, in 1487, Martin Luther was born in Germany. A Christian from the beginning, he was an excellent student and ultimately graduated from the most famous university in Germany at that time. He was preparing to study law when one day, while he was out for a walk, he was struck by a bolt of lightning and knocked to the ground. Terrified by the prospect of death, he called out to a saint for help, and made a vow that he would become a monk. That, he thought, was the surest way to avoid damnation and win his way into heaven.

He wasn't particularly suited to the life of a monk, but he kept his vow. But in the years that followed he continued to be haunted by the awareness of his own sinfulness, and was terrified by the prospect of Christ's coming judgment. He fasted, sometimes for days on end. He gave himself to prayers and vigils. He went to confession, often daily and for hours at a time. But through the years and in spite of all his efforts, he could find no assurance of God's favor and the depression with which he had struggled since his days in the university became more acute.

The light finally began to dawn for him when he began to teach. Having earned his doctorate he started lecturing at the University of Wittenberg: first the Psalms, then Romans, then Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Somewhere along the way, and we don't know the exact moment, the light finally broke in. It was, he said, like the sudden appearance of the sun. Like Augustine before him, the light came through a passage from Scripture: Romans 1:17, "the just shall live by faith."

Here was the comfort and the assurance for which he had longed. No, we can't earn God's favor. Our own efforts will never be good enough. But God has done for us in Jesus what we couldn't do for ourselves: God has provided for our forgiveness and a way into salvation – a free gift offered in Jesus that we receive by faith and faith alone. We are justified in God's sight not by our works, but by our faith. And so it was that the seeds of the Protestant Reformation were planted.

Augustine and Luther show us where to find the fourth stone in this series on the essentials of our faith. The fourth stone is study, but study not just of any book, but the study, specifically, of Scripture. It was the Bible that changed their lives. It

was in these pages that they found those truths for which they had been searching; the light and comfort for which their souls had longed.

We often take this book for granted. There are so many Bibles around – year after year it remains the best-selling book in the world. Yet for so many it remains untouched, unread. Based on a Sunday-School education we received as children we assume we know it when, as both Augustine and Luther found, Scripture is a gift whose truths can touch and shape our lives no matter where we are – no matter how advanced we might be – on this great journey of faith.

It can touch us because the very Spirit of God moves in and through these pages. “All Scripture,” our second lesson reads, “is inspired by God.” The word used – “theopneustos” in the Greek – literally means “God-breathed”. That’s what sets this book apart. That’s what it gives it its unique authority in our life together. Yes, it was humans who wrote every word on every page, and we see the influence of their time, their culture, their world view. But it was humans “breathed into” by God’s own Spirit. These authors were touched and led by God’s Spirit, they were “inspired”, and as a result, it is God’s truths that we find woven into every line and every passage.

The same Spirit that guided people like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, continues to be at work, speaking to us as we open our lives to this magnificent work. It is why a passage could jump out and take hold of Augustine and change the course of his life. It is why a phrase that Luther had encountered time and time again in his studies could one day break in, like the sun bursting over the horizon, and bring a new understanding that would change the course of Christendom.

Do we want to open our lives to God’s presence and power? Then we need to be spending time in this word! There are so many ways that we can incorporate this practice into our lives. We can do it by getting involved in a Bible study at church or in our community. We can do it by making Scripture a part of our daily devotions: using a guide like “These Days,” or working our way through a chapter at a time, or employing some other plan like “Through the Bible.” Or we can bring the third and fourth stones together, and invite a few others to join us for a study group in our home.

It may be that on many days our reading feels dry. It may feel like we are getting nothing out of it at all. Don’t despair. The key is to keep at it, knowing that the Lord is at work, using that time, whether we feel his presence or not. And then

after a week or a month or several months of such study, one day the word will jump out at us and take hold of our hearts in a way that we just know is very much of God. This is the benchmark: the standard to which we come back again and again to test our understanding of God's nature and God's will for our lives.

If you want to open your lives to the Spirit of God, then make the choice to spend time where the Spirit is moving. Pick up this fourth stone and make study a part of your own journey as Augustine and Luther once did. Spend time in the Word. Do that, and who knows how God might speak to you in the weeks and months that lie ahead?