

Confessions - Book X - Chapter Xxi

by St. Augustine

Transcript

30. But is it the same kind of memory as one who having seen Carthage remembers it? No, for the happy life is not visible to the eye, since it is not a physical object. Is it the sort of memory we have for numbers? No, for the man who has these in his understanding does not keep striving to attain more. Now we know something about the happy life and therefore we love it, but still we wish to go on striving for it that we may be happy. Is the memory of happiness, then, something like the memory of eloquence? No, for although some, when they hear the term eloquence, call the thing to mind, even if they are not themselves eloquent--and further, there are many people who would like to be eloquent, from which it follows that they must know something about it--nevertheless, these people have noticed through their senses that others are eloquent and have been delighted to observe this and long to be this way themselves. But they would not be delighted if it were not some interior knowledge; and they would not desire to be delighted unless they had been delighted. But as for a happy life, there is no physical perception by which we experience it in others.

Do we remember happiness, then, as we remember joy? It may be so, for I remember my joy even when I am sad, just as I remember a happy life when I am miserable. And I have never, through physical perception, either seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched my joy. But I have experienced it in my mind when I rejoiced; and the knowledge of it clung to my memory so that I can call it to mind, sometimes with disdain and at other times with longing, depending on the different kinds of things I now remember that I rejoiced in. For I have been bathed with a certain joy even by unclean things, which I now detest and execrate as I call them to mind. At other times, I call to mind with longing good and honest things, which are not any longer near at hand, and I am therefore saddened when I recall my former joy.

31. Where and when did I ever experience my happy life that I can call it to mind and love it and long for it? It is not I alone or even a few others who wish to be happy, but absolutely everybody. Unless we knew happiness by a knowledge that is certain, we should not wish for it with a will which is so certain. Take this example: If two men were asked whether they wished to serve as soldiers, one of them might reply that he would, and the other that he would not; but if they were asked whether they wished to be happy, both of them would unhesitatingly say that they would. But the first one would wish to serve as a soldier and the other would not wish to serve, both from no other motive than to be happy. Is it, perhaps, that one finds his joy in this and another in that? Thus they agree in their wish for happiness just as they would also agree, if asked, in wishing for joy. Is this joy what they call a happy life? Although one could choose his joy in this way and another in that, all have one goal which they strive to attain, namely, to have joy. This joy, then, being something that no one can say he has not experienced, is therefore found in the memory and it is

recognized whenever the phrase \"a happy life\" is heard.

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