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## Augustine on Hope in Times of Suffering

### 1. Hope in Times of Suffering

Chan Hellman, a researcher at the University of Oklahoma, with joint appointments in Social Work and the Medical School, has developed a body of research that argues that for those who face trauma and suffering hope is a lead indicating factor for recovery<sup>2</sup>. This has led Hellman to found the Hope Institute, which offers training, especially to poor and adversely affected communities, that promotes the development of practices that cultivate hope. In a world of war and pandemic, I would like to consider what Augustine might offer us on the topic of hope. Known as the doctor of grace, Augustine is not often associated with hope. Indeed, of the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – his views on faith and love receive the most attention within secondary scholarship<sup>3</sup>. This may in part be a function of where and how hope and its related concepts (e.g., *spes*, *sperare*, *expectare*) show up in Augustine’s writings. Though present, his discussion of hope is less directly evident in the writings that have tradi-

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<sup>2</sup> C. Gwinn – C. Hellman, *Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life*, New York 2019.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of this is found in the popular and well-written: *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, Grand Rapids 1999. Though comprehensive in its coverage of topics and themes in Augustine, it lacks any heading on ‘hope’. Studor is a notable exception here. B. Studor, *Hope*, in: *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. A. Berardino, Downers Grove 2014, p. 288-295.

tionally garnered the most scholarly attention (e.g., *Confessions*, *City of God*, *On the Trinity*)<sup>4</sup>. The only work systematically dedicated to an analysis of hope, at least ostensibly, is Augustine's *Enchiridion*, a late work on the virtues of faith, hope, and love. This text, however, is oddly weighted with only 3 paragraphs out of 121 devoted to hope<sup>5</sup>. Beyond this, the theme of hope appears widely in certain writings, though often as a sub-theme within a wider discussion (e.g., resurrection, immortality) or in conjunction with certain Bible verses (e.g., Jeremiah 17:5, Romans 8:24, Romans 12:12, 1 Timothy 6:17)<sup>6</sup>. These discussions of hope are most prevalent in Augustine's *Narrations on the Psalms* and in his *Sermons* on the Old and New Testaments, especially those that cluster around Easter<sup>7</sup>.

At times contemporary scholarship has been skeptical and dismissive of Augustine on the topic of hope. Often the criticism goes something like this: Augustine's references to hope throughout his corpus reduce to an avoidance strategy of enduring suffering and repressing emotions in the hope of future reward, coalescing into an otherworldly prescriptive and unhelpful approach to human suffering. For those who would bring Augustine's account of hope into a contemporary context, such a critique should not be ignored. It is part of a wider contemporary suspicion of the perceived otherworldly focus of traditional Christian eschatology. In his work *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann identifies this critique as a cen-

<sup>4</sup> Augustine's political theology, especially as it emerges from *De civitate Dei*, is one area that draws some contemporary scholarship on the theme of hope. See, for example: M. Lamb, *Between Presumption and Despair: Augustine's Hope for the Commonwealth*, "American Political Science Review" 112/4 (2018) p. 1036-1049; A. Mittleman, *Hope in a Democratic Age*, Oxford 2009; D. Billings, *Nativity or Advent: Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Moltmann on Hope and Politics*, in: *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. M. Volf – W. Katerberg, Grand Rapids 2004, p. 125-145.

<sup>5</sup> The connection between faith, hope, and love is one cluster that has drawn some contemporary scholarship. See, for example: M. Jackson, *Faith, Hope and Charity and Prayer in St. Augustine*, "Studia Patristica" 22 (1989) p. 265-270; J. Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, San Francisco 1997.

<sup>6</sup> On the role of Pauline passages in the formation of Augustine's views on hope, see: B. Studor, *Augustine and the Pauline Theme of Hope*, in: *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. W. Babcock, University Park 1990, p. 201-225.

<sup>7</sup> For examples from Augustine's sermons (*Sermo*), see: 198, 2-3 (PL, 1024-1026); 213, 5-9 (PL 38, 1062-1065); 232, 5-8 (PL 38, 1110-1112); 255, 2-5 (PL 38, 1186-1188); 261, 1 (PL 38, 1203-1204). Augustine's discussions of hope are scattered throughout his expositions on the Psalms. For a study on expositions 1-91, see: L. Ballay, *Der Hoffnungsbegriff bei Augustinus*, Munich 1964.

tral difficulty for modern audiences and their reception of Christian eschatology<sup>8</sup>.

Vincent Lloyd's recent work, *The Problem with Grace*, provides a provocative take on how contemporary suspicion against Christian eschatology can be brought to bear against Augustine. When he turns to hope, Lloyd begins with the general claim that hope is not a virtue but rather a rhetorical technique<sup>9</sup>. For Lloyd, this is not necessarily bad, and it does not inevitably lead to a rejection of hope. It depends on the object of hope and how hope is deployed to reach one's goals. Here, Lloyd finds Augustine troubling and potentially dangerous. He develops his critique of Augustine in part through the work of Gillian Rose, a 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar writing at the intersection of social thought (sociology) and philosophy (Hegel), who reflected a great deal on human suffering while she was dying of terminal brain cancer<sup>10</sup>. Lloyd notes that Rose had much to say about faith but little about hope because: "the object of hope, Rose seems to suggest, is to be free from laws, free from social norms – and so hope must be resisted. Faith, in contrast, is commended by Rose because it grapples with both good and evil; it grapples with the realities of the world without solace in any fantasy of escape"<sup>11</sup>. Lloyd traces Rose's reticence to speak about hope back to Augustine's contention that hope seeks only the good and never the bad, while faith wrestles with both the good and bad. On this account, Lloyd seems to agree with Rose that Augustinian hope is an avoidance strategy that ignores the existential and moral challenges of suffering. Against this, he cites a saying from the Russian monk Staretz Silouan that Rose was fond of repeating – "keep your mind in hell and despair not" – which she drew on amid her own struggle with cancer as the way human suffering ought to be approached<sup>12</sup>.

Perspicuous as Lloyd's work is in its wider discussions, it mischaracterizes Augustine's account of hope. In so doing, it misses the resources it might offer to contemporary scholars like Hellman who draw on hope to help treat trauma and the wide-spread suffering of our current context. To glimpse these resources, I will analyze Augustine in a thematic rather than

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<sup>8</sup> J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Minneapolis 1993.

<sup>9</sup> V.W. Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology*, Stanford 2011, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> G. Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Blackwell 1992; G. Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*, p. 71-72.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*, p. 65.

chronological manner. That is, I will begin with Augustine's *Enchiridion*, a late work, which will provide a framework and overview of his approach to hope that allows us to recognize and organize themes present in his other writings. From there, I will turn to a few of his Letters and Sermons that concisely raise key moral and spiritual themes prevalent in his wider discussions of hope, and that highlight biblical texts – 1 Tim. 6:17, Romans 12:12, Jeremiah 17:5 – central to his wider interpretation of hope. Here we can also glimpse how the Bishop of Hippo drew on the virtue of hope to counsel those within his community and beyond who sought answers amidst life's suffering.

## 2. Hope in the *Enchiridion*

We can begin with Augustine's short treatise, the *Enchiridion*, which is a late work he composed at the request for a short handbook on Christian education<sup>13</sup>. As I have indicated, Augustine's handling of faith, hope, and love is uneven, but it gives us a baseline from which to work. He opens with the claim that wisdom is the aim of Christian catechesis<sup>14</sup>. This leads to a refrain common in his writings that wisdom is piety, and piety is the worship of God (Job 28:28)<sup>15</sup>. From there, Augustine grounds worship in faith, hope, and love, thereby connecting the triad of virtues to wisdom and the Christian liturgy. Both connections are worth underscoring, and we will examine further the way Augustine anchors hope to Christian sacramental and liturgical practices. But first we should note the intimate connection between faith, hope, and love that Augustine advances: "faith believes, hope and charity pray. But hope and charity cannot be without faith, and so faith prays as well [...]. What is there that we can hope for without believing in it?"<sup>16</sup>. Beyond this, hope and love are closely related in that hope is grounded in love not fear: "So love cannot exist without hope nor

<sup>13</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 1, 6, CCL 46, 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 1, 1-3, CCL 46, 49.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see: Augustine, *Confessiones* 5, 5, 8, CSEL 33, 94; 8, 1, 2, CSEL 33, 171; Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 11, 18, CSEL 60, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 2, 7-8, CCL 46, 51, tr. B. Harbert, *On Christian Belief*, in: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, New York 2005, p. 275-276. "fides credit, spes et caritas orant. sed sine fide esse non possunt, ac per hoc et fides orat [...] quid autem sperari potest quod non creditur?"

hope without love”<sup>17</sup>. Additionally, faith and hope share common ground in that both are oriented toward things unseen – God, heaven, and the like. Each of the three, however, is also irreducible to the other two. Hope and love are different in that love can be for things seen (neighbor) and unseen (God), while hope is always for things unseen. Hope and faith are distinguished in three ways<sup>18</sup>. First, we can have faith in good and bad things – there is a heaven and a hell – but we hope only for good things. Second, faith applies to past, present, and future: Christ was crucified, Christ is in heaven, Christ will return. Hope applies only to things in the future. Third, faith can pertain to us or to others: I believe things about my own origin, and I believe things about the origin of angels. But hope has an irreducible personal, existential component – it is always a claim about my existence. Thus, hope is always about good things, the future, and me.

In saying this, we should not mistake such hope for a myopic, solipsistic vision of naïve bliss. Such a vision is well on the road to what Lloyd terms enchantment: “This is the language of enchantment. It smoothes. The failure of every practice to match a norm is hidden. Everything makes sense: everything happens because it was supposed to happen [...]. In other words, enchantment fills the gap between practices and norms”<sup>19</sup>. Lloyd argues that such enchantment can be theistic or atheistic, sacred or secular, but that they both reduce to the same problem: in refusing to examine critically the gap between practice and norm, between what is and what should be, enchantment ignores or rationalizes away the real emotions, struggles, and suffering of human life. In the end, he concludes both forms of enchantment collapse into a singular idolatrous vision that:

makes us feel comfortable in our world. It makes us feel as if everything fits together nicely, as if we will always do the right thing, or have an explanation for why we did not [...]. And this is idolatrous. An idol captures and fills the gaze. It dazzles. But it ultimately mirrors rather than reveals. It mirrors the desires of the viewer, mirrors with an ‘invisible mirror’. The mirror is invisible because sight has been saturated with the idolatrous reflection. Everything is seen, there is no need to see more. Enchantment is the hegemony of the visible<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 2, 8, CCL 46, 51-52, tr. B. Harbert, *On Christian Belief*, in: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York 2005, p. 276: “proinde nec amor sine spe est nec sine amore spes”.

<sup>18</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 2, 8, CCL 46, 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*, p. 213.

<sup>20</sup> Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*, p. 214.

Lloyd is critical of the Augustinian account of hope in part because he thinks it is an accomplice to the crime of enchantment on a theological and psychological level. Theologically, hope ends in idolatry and so fails the first great commandment to love God. For Augustine, this would lead inevitably to the failure to honor the second great commandment to love others, given his view that true love of other people forms properly through our love for God<sup>21</sup>. The cascading failure would also be felt at the level of self-knowledge and love, given the intimate role that God and others play in the formation of our selfhood<sup>22</sup>. On Lloyd's critique, this would presage the psychological trauma that hope inflicts as it dilutes the hard work of critically confronting and addressing human suffering with a morphine drip that feeds into a naïve panacea of peaceful delusion.

At this point, we seem far afield from a serious engagement with suffering, that is, from Rose's cry for: "the mind to be in hell and not despair". Can Augustinian hope voice such anguish and not crumble in despair or retreat into illusory enchantment? I think the answer is yes, but we must be careful not to mistake the Augustinian good with anodyne elevator music that blissfully carries us upward out of misery. For Augustine, the good things hope seeks are ultimately connected to the Good, which renders hope's vision more akin to Moses on Sinai than a child on Santa's lap. The existential entanglement hope entails shakes, challenges, and convicts us to the core. But the vision of hope is also of one's inclusion within the Good rather than exclusion from it, and it is precisely this inclusion that allows one to face and endure suffering.

To see more precisely the way this vision of hope unfolds, we can begin by looking more closely at the *Enchiridion*. Here, Augustine correlates

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<sup>21</sup> Modern commentators sometimes worry that Augustine's reading of our love of neighbor through our love of God within the *uti/ frui* framework of *De Doctrina Christiana* reduces the neighbor to a utilitarian means for our own return to God that violates the neighbor's integrity. Such criticism, however, is misguided and unfortunate since Augustine shares the same basic concern of his modern critics to preserve the integrity of the neighbor, which Augustine thinks can only be done when human love is elevated through the divine love of the Spirit. Canning provides a prophylactic against contemporary misreads in his excellent account of the reciprocity between divine and human love. R. Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbor in St. Augustine*, Leuven 1993.

<sup>22</sup> This is one of the lessons I draw from the way Augustine weaves the influence of God and other people into his own spiritual formation in *Confessiones*. M. Drever, *Creation and Recreation*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. T. Toom, Cambridge 2020, p. 75-91.

faith, hope, and love to Christian liturgical practice: we learn about faith from the creed, and hope and love from the Lord's Prayer<sup>23</sup>. In this, we see foremost the proper orientation of hope, namely, toward God: "of all those things that must be faithfully believed, the only ones that concern hope are those that are contained in the Lord's Prayer, since, as the word of God attests, *cursed are those who trust in mere mortals* (Jer. 17:5)"<sup>24</sup>. One can sense an anti-Pelagian undertone to Augustine's remark, which is underscored as he goes on to emphasize that God alone is the proper source of hope for both good deeds and good rewards. Augustine's opening claim that the unseen provides the shared orientation of faith and hope returns now to voice a warning that true hope does not look toward us – the visible, the historical, the mutable, the idol.

We should also note that the future orientation of hope straddles the juncture of the historical (good deeds) and eschatological (good rewards) future. True hope does not reduce to an otherworldly escapism but rather sees the connections between the historical and eschatological. Augustine drives this point home in *Enchiridion* when he turns to the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew as a guide to understanding Christian hope<sup>25</sup>. He argues that the first three petitions refer to eternal goods but are also temporal in the sense that they begin here and are perfected in the future. For example, in the second petition – *hallowed be thy name* – we honor God's name now, but this comes to perfection in eternity. In the third petition – *thy kingdom come* – God begins to establish his kingdom through the historical church, but this also comes to perfection in eternity. The final four petitions refer to temporal goods because they are problems that concern us now that will not be present in heaven. For example, the fifth petition seeks forgiveness for sins, a problem that will not exist in heaven. Augustine also argues that these petitions strike a balance between, on one hand, the material and spiritual, and on the other hand, the individual and communal. For example, the fourth petition – *give us today our daily bread* – can be taken literally to refer to the material needs of the body – ours and others – or spiritually to the Eucharist.

<sup>23</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 2, 7, CCL 46, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 30, 114, CCL 46, 110, tr. B. Harbert, *On Christian Belief*, in: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York 2005, p. 339: "Sed de his omnibus quae fideliter sunt credenda, ea tantum ad spem pertinent quae in oratione dominica continentur. *Maledictus enim omnis, sicut divina testantur eloquia, qui spem ponit in homine*".

<sup>25</sup> Augustinus, *Enchiridion de Fide, Spe et Charitate* 30, 115, CCL 46, 110-111.

Augustine further underscores the historical/ eschatological connection he derives from the Lord's Prayer in Letter 157, written in 414-415 during the Pelagian controversy. Here, Augustine begins with the contention that the petitions of the Lord's Prayer all presuppose grace: for example, *lead us not into temptation* is grounded on divine aid<sup>26</sup>. More generally, Augustine argues that grace helps (*adiuvetur*) free will (*liberum arbitrium*), and if God abandons free will we fall into pride. While much could and has been said on the later Augustine's account of human will, I would note here how it illustrates the way Augustine treats divine agency as inclusive of, rather than exclusive to, human agency. God's love enables and perfects human free will rather than limits and destroys it. When we place God ahead of self, we do so not to the exclusion, neglect, or detriment of self, but rather to achieve the full potential and well-being of the self. This is also to say, then, that hope in God is about embracing rather than abandoning self, history, and temporality. The beacon of hope calls us to God, and the divine shadow of providence cast over human affairs is one of light not darkness, guiding us to the fullness of being.

Within the seven petitions, the hard work of hope emerges at a complex, multivalent intersection that looks within the anguish of suffering to voice the desire for healing. The Lord's Prayer acknowledges the hardships of physical and spiritual life, and guides us to hope and seek after the material well-being of adequate food and shelter while also pursuing the spiritual well-being of forgiveness and renewal. The Lord's Prayer also recognizes that such forgiveness and renewal involve the individual, community, and God. It is the hope of every individual to be reconciled to God – *forgive us our sins* – even as there is a communal hope for reconciliation with others – *as we forgive those who sin against us*. This is the hope of every individual who prays, but it is also the prayer of the community expressed within liturgy and sacrament. The Lord's Prayer acknowledges such layers of suffering and renewal within an overarching and anchoring voice of optimism. We pray and hope for a future, one that represents material and spiritual betterment within historical life, but one that is also oriented toward the eschatological future when suffering and sin will be no more.

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<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Epistola* 157, 2, 5, CSEL 44, 451-452.



### 3. The Spiritual Lessons of Hope

We can see, then, that the *Enchiridion* offers important lessons on hope, even if in truncated fashion. In looking beyond this text, I would like to turn to a couple of letters where Augustine addressees how hope intersects, guides, and transforms human life. The overarching twofold theme I wish to underscore is that hope does not represent either an anesthetizing, otherworldly vision that neglects suffering or an extreme ascetic embrace of suffering in search of a better tomorrow. We can begin by returning to Letter 157 and Augustine's exegesis of Matthew 19:21, and Jesus' command to the rich man – *Go, sell all that you have, and give it to the poor; and you will have a treasure in heaven, and come follow me*. Augustine rejects a literal reading of the passage that would have Christians sell their material possessions in hope of attaining salvation. Such a reading suggests a spiritual/material dualism with an attendant ascetic rejection of material wealth in favor of spiritual wealth. Instead, Augustine interprets Jesus' command as a demonstration that the rich man was dishonest in his prior claim that he had kept all of God's commandments (Matthew 19:20)<sup>27</sup>. The point of Matthew 19:21 is not to establish a narrow spiritual precedent of rigorous asceticism but rather to set a broader spiritual principle that God must be honored above all other things. To underscore this claim, Augustine raises the example of the patriarchs who did not sell all they owned in order to follow God, but rather were people of wealth and faith<sup>28</sup>. Augustine drives this point home by reading the passage in Matthew 19 in conjunction with 1 Timothy 6:17 – *do not place hope in the uncertainty of riches*<sup>29</sup>. He argues that the rich man's failure was not in his refusal to sell all that he had, but rather in a prior, more fundamental failure of placing his hopes in his wealth rather than in God. The point is not to reject the material world but rather to embrace God as the center of one's life. In this, Augustine draws on hope to moderate the potentially strong ascetic passage in Matthew 19, intimating that hope offers an inclusive vision of spiritual life in the world and does not reduce to an exclusivist, either/or account of God and world. Stated differently, hope signals that we are not to despise the world but rather to love God – hope is about love not fear. We might see the example

<sup>27</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 157, 4, 25, CSEL 44, 474-475.

<sup>28</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 157, 4, 24, CSEL 44, 473-474.

<sup>29</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 157, 4, 26, CSEL 44, 475; 157, 4, 30, CSEL 44, 478; 157, 4, 33, CSEL 44, 480.

of the rich man as a failure in love and hope grounded in the fear that he has not fulfilled the requirements of the spiritual life.

When hope is aligned to God, we follow the commandments to love God and neighbor. Regarding the latter commandment, Augustine notes Paul's counsel on maintaining a Christian household, which is aided by material wealth (e.g., a home, family property)<sup>30</sup>. Here again, the point is not to reject the world, but rather to use it in service to the love of God and neighbor. Augustine's claims about the household and neighbor also point us toward the broader socio-historical ramifications of his understanding of hope. In Letter 155, written between 413-414, Augustine takes up an ongoing fight he is waging, most notably in *City of God*, with various Greco-Roman philosophies on the nature of the good life in relation to human suffering. In Letter 155, the Epicureans are in Augustine's crosshairs:

But those who in this painful life, in these dying members, under this burden of the corruptible flesh, wanted to be the source and the creators, as it were, of their own happiness, seeking after it and retaining it as if by their own powers, not asking and hoping for it from that fountain of virtues, were unable to grasp God, who resists their pride. For this reason, they fell into the most absurd error. When they claim that the wise man is happy even in the bull of Phalaris, they are forced to admit that at times we should flee from the happy life<sup>31</sup>.

Augustine is referring to a supposed ancient ritual practice in which victims were roasted alive inside a bronze bull, and to Epicurus' claim that the wise person who has conquered the fear of death can remain happy even within the bull. Augustine rejects this idea as absurd. He also rejects Cicero's argument that suicide is justified under such circumstances of extreme suffering. Augustine goes on to draw on Cicero's argument and its wider philosophical use as evidence of contradiction in those who advocate the twofold claim: the wise person can achieve happiness even in extreme

<sup>30</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 157, 4, 30, CSEL 44, 478.

<sup>31</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 1, 2, CSEL 44, 431-432, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100—155*, in: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York 2003, p. 408. "Illi vero qui in hac aerumnosa vita, in his moribundis membris, sub hac sarcina corruptibilis carnis, auctores suae beatæ vitæ et quasi conditores esse voluerunt, vel propriis eam virtutibus appetentes, iamque retinentes, non ab illo fonte virtutum petentes atque sperantes, Deum superbiæ suæ resistentem sentire minime potuerunt. Unde in errore absurdissimum lapsi sunt; ut cum asseverant etiam in Phalaridis tauro beatum esse sapientem, cogantur fateri vitam beatam aliquando esse fugiendam".

suffering; and the wise person is justified in committing suicide in cases of extreme suffering. How is suicide justified if the person is happy?<sup>32</sup> I do not wish to dwell on the logic or details of this argument, which Augustine adjudicates here and elsewhere<sup>33</sup>. Rather, I raise it to illustrate how Augustine draws on hope as an alternate model of human happiness amid suffering. Echoing the *Enchiridion*, Augustine connects wisdom and happiness to piety and the worship of God, and positions hope as a guide to this vision of happiness. Those who fail to hope in God and seek happiness instead in the world commit a form of idolatry, positioning goodness and happiness within their own (material) powers rather than the (immaterial) power of God, leading to a vision of happiness that maximizes pleasure in this world but ultimately fails on the crucible of human suffering. Grounded in the proper worship of God, hope offers a vision of a transcendent good that guards against such idolatry by refusing to reduce happiness to any form of pleasure in this world we might achieve through our own power. In this, hope reframes our understanding of happiness in relation to suffering, offering a vision of ultimate happiness that transcends suffering rather than one forged within and despite suffering.

To many a modern eye, from Nietzsche forward, such a vision of hope might seem deeply misguided. Within a secular model, it is sometimes viewed as a tragic, even cowardly vision that sacrifices the only real opportunity for happiness in this world for the false promise of eternal happiness<sup>34</sup>. Even within theistic models, however, such a vision can receive withering criticism from thinkers such as Lloyd who argue that it amounts to what he terms “enchantment”: an immoral and spiritually bankrupt vision that refuses to address life’s sufferings. In seeking the good and never the bad, as Augustine would have it, critics worry that hope’s vision becomes a grand, ephemeral illusion of human wish-fulfillment to avoid suffering. Such a vision is not of the true God but rather of the God we would wish. Consequently, this vision deconstructs itself in ironic fashion, falling into idolatry as we become beholden to it in an ever vainer and more vig-

<sup>32</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 1, 3, CSEL 44, 432-434.

<sup>33</sup> Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* 1, 23-27, CSEL 40/1, 42-49.

<sup>34</sup> Here, I am less concerned with such a critique, not because it is less serious, but rather because it is grounded on the assumption of atheistic secularism, which is a debate that would take us afield from the topic of this article. Suffice to say, if one assumes atheistic secularism, any religious model of hope that promises happiness beyond this life would de facto fail. The only religious model of hope that might be endorsed is one that could also maximize happiness in this world.

orous attempt to avoid and ignore suffering with the same misguided gusto as those who argue that happiness can be found even while roasting alive inside a bronze bull.

In addressing such criticisms, it is important to keep a few things in mind. Foremost, it bears repeating that Augustine's claim that hope seeks only the good is not a form of wish-fulfillment that beckons toward some trivial, superficial good like that hocked by contemporary televangelists and prosperity gospel gurus: that we should try and feel good and avoid bad feelings, or that the spiritually good amounts to little more than material goods. Hope's vision for the good is ultimately a call to seek the universal good, namely God, and so one that resists the reduction to any limited, temporal pleasure<sup>35</sup>. In seeking this good, hope does not propagate a grand avoidance strategy that refuses to take seriously suffering and evil. Rather, the opposite is the case. Hope refuses to trivialize suffering by covering it over with false illusions of pleasure, as if we could and should be happy amidst suffering if we just tried harder. In offering a vision of the transcendent good, hope acknowledges the profound depth of suffering in maintaining that it is irreconcilable with the achievement of true happiness in this life. Here, Augustine recalls and affirms Cicero's claim: "That statement of the same Cicero is certainly sounder where he says, 'for this life is indeed a death that I could lament if I wanted'. How, then, if this life is rightly lamented, is it shown to be happy? And is it not rather proven to be miserable because it is rightly lamented?"<sup>36</sup>. In the contemporary parlance of a terminal cancer patient, we might return to Rose's epigraph to "keep your mind in hell and despair not" and recognize in the symbolism of hell the irreconcilable conflict between happiness and suffering in this life.

The latter half of Rose's epigraph – "despair not" – also reminds us that we cannot give suffering too much power or it will overwhelm us. Augustine argues that we must reframe suffering and view it through the lens of endurance rather than pleasure as we seek for happiness beyond suffering<sup>37</sup>. This takes suffering seriously, but not as the final word. Here, Augustine reads Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:12 – *Rejoice in hope*;

<sup>35</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 4, 2, CCL 41, 21; 4, 7, CCL 41, 23-24; 41, 3, CCL 41, 496-497; 255, 5, PL 38, 1188.

<sup>36</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 1, 4, CSEL 44, 435, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100-155*, p. 409-410: "Sanior quippe est eiusdem Ciceronis illa sententia, ubi ait: Nam haec vita quidem mors est, quam lamentari possem, si liberet. Quomodo ergo si recte lamentatur, beata comprobatur; ac non potius quoniam recte lamentatur, misera esse convincitur?"

<sup>37</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 1, 4, CSEL 44, 434-435.

*be patient in tribulation* – through his own Christology to elaborate on the details of this framework<sup>38</sup>. Augustine draws on the hidden/revealed (invisible/visible) dynamic of the incarnation to argue that in Christ’s suffering we see an example of patience and endurance, while in Christ’s resurrection we find hope for happiness in the unseen life to come. Noting the connection between hope and faith, Augustine argues that our faith in God’s promise in Christ leads to our hopeful expectation of happiness to come. Augustine’s Christological claims lend context to his model of hope in a few respects. His play on the visible (suffering)/invisible (resurrection) in Christ returns us to the claim that hope is in the unseen. If we take this in conjunction with his reading of Matthew 5:8<sup>39</sup>, that only the pure in heart will see God, it means that the vision of the divine Christ toward which hope points is reserved for the fully purified at the eschaton<sup>40</sup>. This process of purification reminds us of the soteriological and moral dimensions that accompany Augustine’s model of hope. Hope calls us to a patience and endurance that does not passively accept or blissfully ignore the reality of suffering. Rather, true hope must grapple with the evil, injustice, and tragedy in suffering as part of our spiritual and moral reconciliation with God if we are to achieve the promised vision of God. This process of reconciliation does not leave us bereft of all happiness. Augustine points to Paul’s claim to “rejoice in hope” as a type of happiness we experience now in hope – “*beatus esse interim spe*”<sup>41</sup>. Augustine is trying to work between the extreme ends of hedonism and the mortification of the flesh. Hope does not leave us unhappy in this life, but neither does it reduce to a temporal form of happiness. Rather, hope gives us happiness now as a proleptic vision of Christ’s resurrection, which is to say a happiness in time that also points beyond the times – the *saeculum* – toward true happiness. We should also notice a reciprocity within Augustine’s hope-patience pairing: patience leads us to the promise of hope even as hope gives us courage to endure suffering in patience. Or, we might say that Christ’s patience in suffering informs and transforms our understanding of the world as it prepares us for the promise of happiness glimpsed in hope’s vision, even as Christ’s resurrection gives

<sup>38</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 1, 4, CSEL 44, 434-435.

<sup>39</sup> M.R. Barnes, *The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology of 400*, “Modern Theology” 19/3 (2003) p. 329-355.

<sup>40</sup> M. Drever, *De Genesi ad litteram 12: Paul and the Vision of God*, in: *Augustinus: De Genesi ad litteram. Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, ed., J. Brachtendorf – V.H. Drecoll, Augustinus – Werk und Wirkung 13, Paderborn 2021, p. 313-329.

<sup>41</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 1, 4, CSEL 44, 434-435.

hope vision of this promise that lends us the courage to confront the reality of suffering and not despair. Finally, we experience this vision and its transformative effects in rejoicing, that is, within the worship and liturgy of the church. This returns us to the *Enchiridion* and Augustine's claims that hope connects with wisdom and the worship of God, even as it reminds us that true hope, like true worship, is always of the good because it is the worship of God and never of the bad, lest one fall into idolatry.

#### 4. The Moral Lessons of Hope

At various points, I have indicated that Augustine connects hope with virtue. In the quote above, for example, Augustine comments that hope, in orienting us to God, opens us to virtue. In connection with this, he cites Psalm 18:2 – *I shall love you, O Lord, my virtue* – and Psalm 40:5 – *Happy is the man for whom the name of the Lord is his hope and who has not search after vanities and insane lies* – and argues that the “vanities and lies” of sin disclose the necessity of hope's vision of God, which opens us to the divine aid necessary to achieve happiness and virtue<sup>42</sup>. Augustine also quotes Jeremiah 17:5 – *cursed is everyone who put his hope in a human being* – as evidence that happiness is not grounded in any human capacity or dimension of finite existence: the visible and bodily (e.g., material wealth) or the invisible and intellectual (e.g., human knowledge)<sup>43</sup>. Here again, hope does not issue in a rejection of human life, but rather in the affirmation that God is the source of meaning and value. As in the *Enchiridion*, we do not abnegate moral responsibility on the hope that providential divine grace will save us by divine fiat. Hope reorients rather than rejects virtue.

Importantly, Augustine identifies an individual and communal dimension within this process of reorientation. We should seek our own happiness and the happiness of the city (*civitas*)<sup>44</sup>. This leads Augustine into a discussion of the cardinal political virtues of courage, prudence, temperance, and justice<sup>45</sup>. These virtues too must be transformed through hope's vision of

<sup>42</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 2, 6, CSEL 44, 436-437.

<sup>43</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 2, 8, CSEL 44, 438-439.

<sup>44</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 3, 9, CSEL 44, 439.

<sup>45</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 3, 10, CSEL 44, 440-441. Dodaro provides an excellent analysis of Augustine's characterization of the virtues in Letter 155. R. Dodaro, *Political and Theological Virtues in Augustine, Letter 155 to Macedonius*, “Augustiniana” 54 (2004) p. 431-474.

God: “And those virtues will be true virtues and, by the help of him by whose bounty they were given, they will grow and become perfect so that they will without any doubt bring you to the truly happy life, which is none other than eternal life”<sup>46</sup>. This transformation in God leads to the end of the four virtues, viewed as both their perfection and cessation: prudence will no longer distinguish evil (cessation), but it will unite with divine foresight (perfection); courage will not endure adversity (cessation), but it will cling eternally to the good (perfection); temperance will not wrestle with desire (cessation), but it will control it (perfection); and justice will not aid the poor (cessation), but it will possess full righteousness (perfection)<sup>47</sup>. In saying this, Augustine is careful to identify a connection between hope’s vision of the happy life and virtue without reducing the former to the latter. The life of virtue lived now is not identical to the happy life to come:

with these virtues given by God we now live a good life (*bona vita*), and afterwards we will be given its reward, the happy life (*beata vita*), which can only be eternal life. For the same virtues are practiced here and will have their results there. Here they involve work; there they will be our reward. Here they are our duty (*officio*); there they will be the end (*fine*) we attain<sup>48</sup>.

This is part of Augustine’s wider endeavor to maintain a transcendental foundation for the good irreducible to any finite goods, but one that, nonetheless, does not leave us bereft of hope and beholden to despair: “And so all good and holy people, even amid torments of every sort, supported by God’s help, are called happy because of the hope for that end, the end in which they will be happy. For if they were always in the same torments and the fiercest pains, no sound mind would doubt that they were miserable no matter what virtues they had”<sup>49</sup>. The proleptic vision hope offers of a happiness to come, which we have seen is grounded in Christ, is glimpsed now

<sup>46</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 3, 12, CSEL 44, 442, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100-155*, p. 413: “et verae illae virtutes erunt, et illius opitulatione, cuius largitate donatae sunt, ita crescent et perficientur, ut te ad vitam vere beatam, quae non nisi aeterna est, sine ulla dubitatione perducant”.

<sup>47</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 3, 12, CSEL 44, 442-443.

<sup>48</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 4, 16, CSEL 44, 446, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100-155*, p. 415: “his, inquam, virtutibus divinitus impertitis, et bona vita nunc agitur, et postea praemium eius, quae nisi aeterna esse non potest, beata vita persolvitur. Hic enim sunt eadem virtutes in actu, ibi in effectu; hic in opere, ibi in mercede; hic in officio, ibi in fine”.

<sup>49</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 4, 16, CSEL 44, 446-447, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100-155*, p. 415: “Itaque omnes boni et sancti, etiam in tormentis quibuslibet divino fulti adiutorio, spe

in support of virtue. It is such hope that, in Rose's words, allows us to dwell within the hell of life's suffering, despair not, and seek a virtuous engagement with and transformation of the world.

This process of transformation is completed upon the eschaton, but it begins now in the love that connects us with God: "yet even in this life there is no virtue but to love what one should love. To choose it is prudence; to be turned away from it by no difficulties is courage; to be turned away from it by no enticement is temperance; to be turned away from it by no pride is justice"<sup>50</sup>. Drawing on the connection between hope and love, Augustine argues that love enacts hope's reorientation of the virtues. This leads back to the two great commandments to love God and neighbor, which encapsulate virtue<sup>51</sup>. The love of God must come first in an inclusive rather than exclusive sense, enabling and not denigrating the love of neighbor. That is, hope's vision of the good (and not the bad) is also that of the true and just, and love's enactment of this vision allows us to love others and ourselves in a just manner: "there is no other love by which one loves himself but that by which he loves God. For one who loves himself in another way should rather be said to hate himself. He, of course, becomes unjust and is deprived of the light of justice when he turns away from the better and higher good"<sup>52</sup>. Here again, in the connection between hope and love we see that hope's vision of God is not wish-fulfillment that leads one to ignore the suffering of others, but rather a vision engaged in the difficult work of aiding the unjust and suffering. Even more, in this context Augustine defines the neighbor in universal terms: our neighbors are not simply those with whom we share a "blood relationship" but rather includes all who belong to the "*rationis societate*"<sup>53</sup>. The mandate to love others includes all of humanity<sup>54</sup>.

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illius finis beati vocantur, quo fine beati erunt: nam si in eisdem tormentis et atrocissimis doloribus semper essent, cum quibuslibet virtutibus eos esse miseros nulla sana ratio dubitaret".

<sup>50</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 4, 13, CSEL 44, 443, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100-155*, p. 413: "Quamquam et in hac vita virtus non est, nisi diligere quod diligendum est: id eligere, prudentia est: nullis inde averti molestiis, fortitudo est; nullis illecebris, temperantia est: nulla superbia, iustitia est".

<sup>51</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 4, 14, CSEL 44, 444.

<sup>52</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 4, 15, CSEL 44, 445, tr. R. Teske, *Letters 100-155*, p. 414: "nullam esse aliam dilectionem qua quisque diligit seipsum, nisi quod diligit Deum. Qui enim aliter se diligit, potius se odisse dicendus est: fit quippe iniquus, privaturque luce iustitiae, cum a potiore ac praestantiore bono aversus".

<sup>53</sup> Augustinus, *Epistola* 155, 4, 14, CSEL 44, 444.

<sup>54</sup> Building on Augustine's reading the neighbor through the language of Matthew 25:40 – "the least of these" – Canning argues that Augustine extends the love we are



## 5. Perishing from Hope

Augustine opens *Sermon 4*, dated between 410-419, with a reference to Romans 8:6 – *to have a materialist understanding is death* – and a caution against “fleshly (*carnaliter*) understandings” that oppose the Spirit of truth<sup>55</sup>. He goes on to cite the trio of faith, hope, and love as the path to avoid such error: “hoping for what we do not yet possess, believing what we do not yet see, loving what we do not yet embrace”<sup>56</sup>. All three are oriented toward the future, the unseen, and what is not possessed. But they also position us within the present: “Let us go forward then, walking in hope”<sup>57</sup>. Hope lives at the tension between present and future, standing against both the flight of fantasy from suffering and an idolatrous reduction of virtue to the secular and material. This is how one ought to approach a life of uncertainty and suffering, which Augustine reads through the *peregrinatio* theme that is prevalent in this sermon – “*in peregrinatione se vivere, patriam desiderare* (living as travelers, desiring their homeland)”<sup>58</sup>. Here, Augustine connects hope to baptism, returning us to the liturgical role of hope in guiding the proper worship of God. He maintains that baptism elevates one to the spiritual through the material, taking the element of water to signify the spiritual forgiveness for sins and the promise of eternal life, which gives sacramental voice to hope’s calling to live now in patience for the future (unseen) divine promise. This is not an avoidance strategy, as Augustine reflects on the fact that Christians do not immediately receive the salvation promised in baptism, but rather must live in hope amidst suffering while journeying as pilgrims toward the homeland.

In *Sermon 20*, dated to around 419, Augustine turns to the question of how Christians, having been baptized, should live in hope while surrounded by suffering and sin. He argues there are two basic dangers, one in

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to give to our neighbor beyond impoverished Christians to the poor generally (*minimi mei*). Similarly, O’Donovan contends that Augustine’s ethics universalize the ‘neighbor’. Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbor*, p. 383-394. O. O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, Eugene 1980, p. 121-122.

<sup>55</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo 4*, 1, CCL 41, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo 4*, 1, CCL 41, 20, tr. E. Hill, *Sermons*, in: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, New York 1992, p. 21: “sperans quod nondum tenet, credens quod nondum videt, amans cui nondum haeret”.

<sup>57</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo 4*, 1, CCL 41, 20, tr. E. Hill, *Sermons*, p. 21: “Intendat ergo ambulans in spe”.

<sup>58</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo 4*, 9, CCL 41, 26.

a deficient and the other in an excessive kind of hope<sup>59</sup>. The former weighs sin and suffering too strongly, the latter too lightly. The former is trapped in the past, the latter in the future. To return to Rose's epigraph, the former is unable to "despair not" and the latter does not take seriously the need to "keep your mind in hell".

The first type of false hope Augustine argues is a deficient hope, or a lack of hope. It leads to despair (*desperatio*) because one thinks there is nothing that can be done about sin or a life filled with suffering. This causes one to give into sin and embrace suffering in nihilistic fashion. Augustine calls this the "gladiator mentality" and argues it breeds false courage that is nothing more than a primitive hedonism of living for the moment because one is unable to see beyond the immediacy of suffering and death<sup>60</sup>. This puts on tragic and vivid display Augustine's warning against "materialist (*carnaliter*) understandings" that have reduced the transcendental good to temporal goods, casting Romans 8:6 – *to have a materialist understanding is death* – as a harbinger of spiritual and moral ruin. Against this, and tracking the transformation of virtue that occurs in hope, Augustine contrasts the gladiator with the Christian martyr who also faces immanent death but lives in hope and exhibits genuine courage: "this was the kind of confidence that filled all the martyrs. Holding fast to right faith, not dying and suffering for a false belief, a vain illusion, an empty hope or any uncertainty, but for the promise made by Truth"<sup>61</sup>.

The second type of false hope Augustine details is an excessive hope that cuts in two directions<sup>62</sup>. Excessive hope can lead one to expect that the promise and pardon for sin means that heaven is at-hand and that there will be no more suffering and temptation. Alternatively, excessive hope can lead one to expect that God will easily and totally forgive sin whenever one desires it. Hope makes sin light here; repentance is put off into the indefinite future. Both versions of excessive hope are false in their failure to weigh properly sin and suffering. While they are a hope in the good and not the bad, they are bad forms of hope – "*male sperantes*" – because they are visions of a false good<sup>63</sup>. Augustine cautions that one can perish from such

<sup>59</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 20, 3-4, CCL 41, 264-267.

<sup>60</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 20, 3, CCL 41, 264-265.

<sup>61</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 4, 2, CCL 41, 21, tr. E. Hill, *Sermons*, p. 22: "Hac fiducia repleti omnes martyres, tenentes rectam fidem, non morientes nec patientes pro falsa fide, pro vano phantasmate, pro spe inani, pro re incerta, sed pro veritatis pollicitatione".

<sup>62</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 20, 4, CCL 41, 265-267.

<sup>63</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 20, 4, CCL 41, 265.

hope – “*spe perit*” – underscoring again that hope’s vision of the good and not the bad does not reduce to psychological wish-fulfillment, but rather opens one to the difficult road of reconciliation with the Good<sup>64</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

Augustine may not give us a systematic account of hope, but he does have much to say on the topic that he intended to help those suffering in his own time and that can continue to offer us guidance today. Augustine develops nuanced stances on hope, using it to bridge the historical and eschatological without a reduction to either. Here, he draws on hope to maintain a tension between temporal and eternal life, between the present reality of suffering and the future hope of happiness. We can see also a close connection between hope and its compatriots of faith and love, a connection Augustine utilizes to explore how hope epistemically and affectively transforms the moral and spiritual principles that guide our actions in the world. Reading Augustine’s views on hope as superficially otherworldly, mistakenly reduces the historical-eschatological tension in such way that the hope of eternal life eclipses and neglects the reality of temporal sufferings. This misses the way Augustine treats hope as a bridge to the promise of eschatological happiness in a transformative manner that realigns and reevaluates both spiritual practice and civic (public) virtue without reducing either to a purely otherworldly end.

### Augustine on Hope in Times of Suffering

(summary)

This article examines the way Augustine draws on the theological virtue of hope to address how people should live in times of suffering. Of the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – hope is the least explored theme in contemporary Augustinian scholarship. This article develops a framework for Augustine’s model of hope from his *Enchiridion* and then applies it to select *Sermons* and *Letters*. Through this, we see that for Augustine hope does not represent either an anesthetizing, otherworldly vision that neglects suffering or an extreme ascetic embrace of suffering. Rather, hope seeks the transcendent good that acknowledges the profound depth of suffering while also maintaining a vision of happiness to come. Here, Augustine draws on hope to maintain a tension between temporal and eternal life, between the present reality of suffering and the future hope of happiness.

<sup>64</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 20, 4, CCL 41, 264.

We will also see a close connection between hope and its compatriots of faith and love, a connection Augustine utilizes to explore how hope transforms the moral and spiritual principles that guide our actions in the world.

**Keywords:** Augustine; Hope; Suffering; Theological Virtues; Sermons; Letters; Enchiridion

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