

City of God by Saint Augustine

Author: Saint Augustine

Original Title: *De Civitate Dei*

Written: c. 413–426 AD

Translation (Penguin Classics): Henry Bettenson

Genre: Christian Philosophy, Theology, Apologetics

Edition: Penguin Classics, featuring a medieval illumination of heaven and the saints

Introduction: Why Read *City of God*?

Saint Augustine's *City of God* is one of the most influential works in Christian theology, political philosophy, and the Western intellectual tradition. Written in response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD, Augustine provides a sweeping narrative and argument defending Christianity against pagan critiques and lays out a vision of two symbolic cities:

“Two loves have made two cities: the love of self, even to the contempt of God, made the earthly city; the love of God, even to the contempt of self, made the heavenly city.”

— **Book XIV, Chapter 28**

Historical Context

- **Fall of Rome (410 AD):** Rome was sacked by the Visigoths, which shook the ancient world. Many Romans blamed Christianity for weakening the empire.
- **Pagan vs. Christian Debate:** Pagans claimed abandoning the old gods brought divine punishment. Augustine responds with a theological and historical

treatise.

- **Augustine's Aim:** To show that the City of Man (Rome) was always destined to fall, and only the City of God (the heavenly kingdom) is eternal.

Structural Overview

The work is divided into **22 books** and falls into two major parts:

Books I–X: The Refutation of Paganism

- **Books I–V:** Refutes the idea that pagan gods protected Rome.
- **Books VI–X:** Examines the nature of Roman religion and philosophy, arguing their gods were immoral and impotent.

Books XI–XXII: The Construction of the Christian Philosophy of History

- **Books XI–XIV:** Explores the origins of the two cities (Heavenly and Earthly).
- **Books XV–XVIII:** Describes the development of the two cities through biblical history.
- **Books XIX–XXII:** Looks to the final destiny—peace in the City of God and judgment for the City of Man.

Major Themes

- **The Two Cities**
 - **City of God:** Formed by love of God; spiritual, eternal.
 - **City of Man:** Formed by love of self; temporal, doomed to pass.
- **The Problem of Evil**
 - Evil is not a created thing, but a perversion of good.
 - The fall of Rome is part of God's greater providential plan.

- **Divine Providence**
 - History has a purpose. God uses even destruction to bring about spiritual truth.
- **The Vanity of Earthly Glory**
 - Earthly achievements, empires, and pleasures are fleeting.
 - Eternal reward lies only in God's kingdom.
- **Biblical Interpretation**
 - Augustine uses Scripture allegorically and literally to trace the arc of human history.

Key Concepts and Quotes

- **"Two loves have made two cities..."** (Book XIV.28)
- **Original Sin & Human Nature:** Humanity is fallen and needs grace.
- **True Peace:** Only found in eternal communion with God.
- **Critique of Rome:** Roman glory was built on violence and pride, not virtue.

Suggested Biblical Passages to Read Alongside

To better understand Augustine's references and logic:

- **Genesis 1–11** – Creation, Fall, Cain & Abel, Noah (Books XI–XV)
 - **Exodus 20** – The Ten Commandments
 - **Psalms 2, 14, 37, 46** – On justice and divine kingship
 - **Matthew 5–7** – The Beatitudes and ethics of the City of God
 - **Romans 5 & 8** – Original sin and salvation
 - **Revelation 21–22** – New Jerusalem and the final destiny
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How to Approach Reading

- **Slow and Steady:** This is a dense book. Take your time.
 - **Use Marginal Notes:** Highlight key ideas and biblical references.
 - **Pair with Commentary:** Use scholarly introductions and study notes.
 - **Reflect After Each Book:** Ask: What is Augustine saying about the human condition? About God's justice?
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Questions for Reflection

1. What does Augustine mean by “peace” and how does it differ from Roman ideals?
 2. How does Augustine’s interpretation of history contrast with pagan historians?
 3. Do you see parallels between Augustine’s world and our modern society?
 4. What is the role of suffering in the City of God?
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Why It Matters Today

City of God is not just a theological masterpiece—it’s a lens for viewing history, politics, and purpose. Augustine invites us to detach from worldly obsessions and orient our lives toward eternal truth. In an age of decline, his message was a call to look beyond catastrophe and see God’s hand guiding everything toward redemption.

“Thus the earthly city glories in itself, the heavenly city glories in the Lord.”
— ***Book XVIII, Chapter 54***