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10-31-2019

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AJ Funk  
*Dordt University*

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### Recommended Citation

Funk, A. (2019). Prodigal Theology for an Anxious Age: A Review of On the Road with Saint Augustine. Retrieved from [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/student\\_work/62](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/student_work/62)

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# in things

October 31, 2019

## **Prodigal Theology for an Anxious Age: A Review of *On the Road with Saint Augustine***

**AJ Funk**

**Title:** *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts*

**Authors:** James K. A. Smith

**Publisher:** Brazos Press

**Publishing Date:** October 1, 2019

**Pages:** 256 (Hardcover)

**ISBN:** 978-1587433894

“But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.”<sup>1</sup>

These are perhaps the most powerful words in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. In *On The Road with Saint Augustine*, James K.A. Smith, through the works of Augustine, illustrates how that parable is the story of all of us. Every child of God, believer and nonbeliever, is longing to come home, to have the Father throw his arms around us and kiss us. And yet, far too often, we settle for the road, anxiously wondering if this is all there is. The journey is the point, “the road is life.” Smith, along with Augustine, urges readers to ask the question, “what if I went home?”

Smith invites readers to enter into this journey home with Augustine; he has been traveling with the Saint for “what feels like a lifetime” in this masterful exposition of Augustine’s prodigal theology. It truly is, as the subtitle suggests, “a real-world spirituality for restless hearts.”

Smith begins his work by drawing readers into the prodigal narrative, illustrating the ways in which we are “hearts on the run,” as the title of his first chapter suggests. Illustrating the anxiety and restlessness of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, he roots the philosophical development of existentialism, absurdism, and other similar philosophies in the prodigal thought of Augustine. He draws out how, when read sans grace, Augustine’s writings and restless heart provide the groundwork for thinkers like Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, and Heidegger to build their own philosophies. Finally, Smith shows his cards:

What if the human condition was understood not as Odyssean (a neat and tidy return) or Sisyphean (learning to get over your hope for home), but as being like the experience of a refugee? What if being human means being a cosmic émigré—vulnerable, exposed, unsettled, desperate, looking for a home I’ve never been to before? The longings of a refugee—to escape hunger, violence, and the quotidian experience of being bereft in order to find security, flourishing, and freedom—are good precisely because they are so deeply human.

Smith suggests that to be human is to be a refugee, longing for home, never quite being satisfied. The road is *not* life, though we will be on the road until the Father finally welcomes us home into his loving arms. And, because we will be on the road until the end of our earthly lives, we need to “adopt the posture of the refugee who travels light.” We are all strangers in this world, citizens of “city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, our lives must be lived in constant tension—on the road, longing for home, but finding places to rest along the way.

This is what Smith seeks to accomplish through the “Detours on the Road to Myself” section which dominates the rest of the book. Covering topics as broad as Sex, Mothers, Story, and Death, he offers ways to encounter each of them with a pilgrim posture, training readers to love them in an orderly manner. None of the many chapter topics he covers are “evil” or “wrong” in themselves (with the exception, obviously, of “Death”), but each can be loved or utilized in a disordered manner, so as to become an obstacle to true prodigal living.

Lack of space prohibits comment on each of Smith’s chapters, but perhaps the most intriguing discussion, and, arguably, the most central to his argument, is the chapter on Story. In this chapter, Smith argues that our stories matter precisely because they are normal. Our stories give us a sense of solidarity with those around us, and with the “large cloud of witnesses surrounding us.”<sup>3</sup> Smith suggests that Augustine’s motivation in writing the *Confessions* was that “[m]aybe someone will see themselves in my story. Maybe someone will hear this prodigal tale, with all its dead ends and heartbreak, and whisper, ‘That’s *me*.’” I know that is the experience I had with the *Confessions*. As I read

it for the first time, it didn't feel as though I was reading an autobiography from the fourth century. It felt like I was reading the cries of my own heart; a faint echo deep within me, drawn up to the surface more and more as I read further.

Not everything I heard in those echoes was positive—far from it. But, hearing them through the story of another gave me hope. It gave my prodigal heart a longing to find rest in God, as Augustine so famously said: “Our hearts are restless, Master, until they rest in you.”<sup>4</sup> Living into the prodigal story of longing for a home I've never been to, in solidarity with all those who have roamed this road before, has brought a great deal of hope to life.

Smith's invitation for readers to join into this story as a familiar character—a Ramblin' Man, as the Allman Brothers might call it—is a call to join into the narrative of God's people. Since the beginning, God's people have lived in the story of exile and exodus. We long for the exodus into the Kingdom of God; it gives our hearts an existential angst. But, the life of a prodigal is one called to live in the tension. We are prodigals, exiled into a world that is not our home.

To bring the Kingdom here and now, but also to long for the fulfillment of it at the Last. Smith balances the tension between a Kingdom and home that is here and one that the heart longs for in fulfillment through this chapter brilliantly. This is just one of the many parts of life that Smith re-frames in light of the prodigal life of the Christian, and though it stands out as noteworthy above the rest, each of them is worth reading time and time again.

Smith ends the book with a short chapter on “Homecoming.” It is brilliant and powerful, providing hope for the prodigal that cries, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20) Perhaps if I have one desire for the book is that this chapter were extended to a longer discourse, perhaps giving Smith room to explore what “home” and “rest” are for the restless, prodigal heart. I know they are feelings I have never felt. I would have loved to read from Smith what Augustine said about the joy and hope of the Heavenly City, beyond the prodigal journey that all children of God must take in the meantime.

*Smith's On The Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts* is a brilliant distillation of Augustine's prodigal theology, bringing hope to the reader that there is a fulfillment to all the sorrows and pains of this world. The Kingdom is coming. The Father will bring us home and give us rest through the Cross of his Son. Perhaps in an age of such great anxiety and despair, this is just the book we need.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Luke 15:20, NIV
2. Heb. 11:10, CEB
3. Hebrews 12:1
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1