

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 38

Gregory the Great

As we have studied the first 500 years of the church, we have seen the Roman Empire reach its peak as the greatest and most powerful civilization then known to man. We have also seen the Roman Empire split into two, a Western and Eastern section, with the Western section eventually disintegrating completely. While the massive Roman Empire crumbled, the church grew from a rag-tag band of followers in an outlying country of the Empire through the pains of persecution and martyrdom into the religion and faith of both the Eastern division of the Empire and the remnants of the Western division.

Also, we have seen the controversies that arose as the church sought to establish the boundaries of scriptural doctrines that define orthodox faith and expose heresy. As the church grew, it took on a structure much like the Roman Empire itself. The church had Bishops who oversaw the major metropolitan areas much as a Roman Governor would have during the Empire. The stronger Bishops, who governed greater areas, greater numbers, and greater budgets, grew in their power over lesser Bishops. In addition, the Bishop of Rome became a central power force using certain scriptures and Roman inheritance laws to explain a primacy of the Roman Bishop over the church.

As we unfolded this history, we considered a number of distinguished men in the church who have borne the title of “Church Fathers.” These were men who were considered the formative figures in the development of the church. Of these Western church fathers, four are also called “Doctors” of the church.¹ Of the four doctors, we have studied three: Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome. Today, we study Gregory the Great, the fourth doctor of the early Latin Church. Gregory is also considered the last of the Latin Church Fathers. With Gregory, we clearly leave the Roman Empire and enter the medieval ages.

Why was Gregory considered so important to the church? Why did he get the addition of “the Great” to his name? These are questions we will answer in two ways. First, we will look at basic biographical information on Gregory. Then, we will consider the thought of Gregory, reading from some of his writings we still have today.

¹ “Doctor,” from the Latin *docere*, means “to teach.” These were not doctors in the 21st century sense of a medic who brings treatment and health. Rather, they were considered the supreme teachers. We still use the word slightly in this manner when we speak of one having a “doctoral degree” like a PhD.

BIOGRAPHY

Gregory was born around 540 in a well to do Christian family in Rome. His ancestors were Roman nobility as well as Church nobility. He had at least one Pope that was a blood relative.² He also had relatives that served Rome in civil service capacities.

Gregory's family had a number of estates and properties, including property in Rome as well as Sicily, in southern Italy. The wealth enabled Gregory's family to get him an excellent education with an emphasis on law. Despite the wealth, the pedigree, and the education, Gregory's youth was difficult. He grew up at a time when Germanic tribes constantly targeted Rome. Within a period of 20 years, Rome was taken and retaken six different times. Each time, there was more devastation on property and people. In the midst of these troubles, Gregory took his education and provided leadership for the city of Rome, serving as "Prefecture" of Rome (this was the highest civil post at the time in the city).

Later in life, Gregory's parents changed from their secular callings and went into full time ministry. Gregory would soon follow the same path. After much prayer, Gregory decided that rather than walk the city in his comfortable riches, he should more directly serve God. So, Gregory sold his possessions, turned his properties into monasteries, and began living the life of a monk at the monastery of Saint Andrew in Rome.³ It was in the monastic life that Gregory became familiar with the Rule of Benedict. In what is typical of human history, God took an apparent tragedy and used it for the good of his kingdom. The invading Lombards ransacked Benedict's monastery at Monte Cassino, sending the monks fleeing. Those monks fled to Rome where they brought the Rule of Benedict to Gregory's monastery. Not only did the monks bring the actual Rule of Benedict, but they also brought their personal reminiscences about Benedict as well. Gregory would come to write the biography of Benedict that we used and discussed last week.

Gregory spent three years in Saint Andrew before the Pope sent him as an ambassador to the Emperor in Constantinople. While in Constantinople (a six year stint), Gregory spent a great deal of time teaching and preaching. Gregory also entered into fierce debate with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Eutychius (not the Eutychus we studied from the 400's) over the nature of the resurrected body. Eutychius taught that the resurrected body was only spiritual. Gregory taught that it was physical. Gregory won that dispute before returning home to Rome in 586.

² Gregory was the great great grandson of Pope Felix III (483-492).

³ Gregory actually started this monastery. This monastery was on the site of Gregory's home in Rome.

When Gregory returned to Rome, he found things dismal. There were floods, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, inflated prices, and most every sign that Jesus gives about the age before his return. The plague stalked the City killing large numbers. Gregory, along with many others, believed that the signs pointed to an imminent return of Jesus.⁴ In 590, Pope Pelagius II died from the plague, and on September 3, 590, Gregory was made Pope.

Gregory wrote about this experience at the time. He did not want the job of Pope. In fact, he actively sought against the position. At the time, Gregory considered his quiet monastic life one he would term “leisurely freedom” (*otium*). The negative of that life (which Latin would form by adding *neg-* to *otium* - *negotium*) was “business” (hence, the English word “negotiate”). Gregory did not long for the business of the church!

As Pope, Gregory found himself in a better position to address the many problems around him. The invading Germanic tribes that were devastating the Italian peninsula were called Lombards. The Lombards did not invade like the Goths had previously. The Lombards would burn, pillage, and destroy most everything in their path. Gregory’s skill set came into great use. More so than any of the secular powers, Gregory was able to negotiate with the Lombards and bring some measure of peace back to much of Italy.

Gregory’s administrative skills also served the church and society well. He reorganized the church’s properties into what would later become the Papal States. In the process, Gregory made the church more responsive to the affliction and hunger of the devastated cities and countryside.

In addition to the physical and administrative responsibilities of the church, Gregory worked hard to increase the spiritual acumen of its leaders. Too many Bishops were not of the godly caliber that Gregory thought necessary. Gregory took great pains to try and appoint new Bishops that put God and His work first in their priorities rather than somewhere further down the list!

As mentioned earlier, the influence of Benedict and the Benedictine Rule on Gregory was profound. Gregory was the first Pope who had ever been a monk. Not surprisingly, Gregory chose 40 Benedictine monks, headed by Augustine of

⁴ In one of his sermons, Gregory went over the list of signs for the end of time. He noted that of the list Jesus gave, most everything was fulfilled: nation was rising against nation, the distress in the world was greater than ever before, earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters were constant, and of course, the plague was killing great numbers of people. Gregory did note that the signs in the sun, moon, and stars had not yet occurred; yet most felt that those changes were well on the way. Gregory used this sermon to motivate the people to live lives ready to meet the Judge of the whole earth.

Canterbury (a title he got *after* his mission work), to go into England to evangelize the island. As mentioned earlier, Gregory wrote the life of Benedict, ascribing a measure of fame to the man and his monastic Rule. Gregory also saw that the Rule itself was used in countless monasteries of the period. In fact, Gregory is often termed the “co-founder” of Benedictine monasticism, along with Benedict himself.

Gregory paid great attention to the worship of the church. Scholars differ on the degree to which Gregory reformed the liturgy and worship of the church; however, all scholars agree that his reforms were quite significant. Scholars similarly disagree over whether Gregory actually created the chanting form that bears his name (“Gregorian Chants”) or whether that name was applied to chants that devolved in the succeeding two centuries from those of Gregory’s Church.

While Pope, Gregory not only dealt with international problems of the world and spiritual problems of the Church, but he also dealt with the health problems of Rome. The plague that was running rampant in Rome when Gregory first assumed the papacy was one of his first crises to handle. Gregory declared that the church populace should organize around the seven hills and seven main churches in Rome and all march at once together toward St. Peter’s, praying and worshipping the whole time. Through this unity, the church was seeking divine intervention on behalf of the City. History does record that the plague did, in fact, abruptly stop in 590 in Rome. Another interesting historical aspect to this is Gregory insisted that whenever anyone sneezed, which was frequently a symptom of the plague, that the sign of the cross be made over that person with the declaration/prayer that God would bless that person. Many historians recognize Gregory as the reason so many in Western Civilization still say, “God bless you” when someone sneezes.

In this same vein, Gregory was a pragmatist. When reports came to Gregory that a certain man had a gift of miraculous healings, Gregory found the man and sent him to a hospital and told him to use his gift! Gregory felt if the man in fact had the power to heal people, “it would be proved there.”⁵

One of Gregory’s greatest contributions to the church came from his writings. Gregory wrote more than most any pope preceding him or following him in the next 500 years. We still have a huge body of his work available today. We have a good number of the sermons Gregory delivered (including 40 sermons Gregory preached on the gospels while pope between 590 and 592 along with other sermons on Ezekiel and the Song of Songs). Additionally, Gregory wrote hundreds of letters (we have about 850 still today preserved in 14 books at the

⁵ *Dialogues* 3.35.

Vatican) along with what might have been the longest book ever produced by Christianity up to that time, a commentary on Job.

We miss something of Gregory if we fail to note that, in the midst of the incredible international and internal pressures and problems he confronted, Gregory's correspondence reveals that he tenderly dealt with individuals and individual problems for which most men in his position would never find time. For example, one ex-monk named Venantius received some pretty stern letters from Gregory over leaving the vows of his monastic calling and settling into a married life of business. The post-monastic life was not one that brought great glory to God. Instead, continued complaints made their way to Gregory about both Venantius's treatment of people (including a Bishop of the church) as abuse by Venantius's wife meted out to certain peasants. Gregory tried, to little avail, to get Venantius to turn his life back around. Years later, when Venantius was in poor health, Gregory wrote him a letter, not only encouraging him and praying for his best recovery, but extending warm and personal thoughts for the two young daughters of Venantius as well. After Venantius died, the daughters wrote Gregory, sending him a gift they had made along with their thanks. Gregory responded to this letter, in a warm and gentle manner, urging the girls to live good lives for God.

Gregory lived most of his adult life in poor health; most days as an adult he would take some type of rest to get through the day. He frequently taught and preached, with a somewhat weak voice, from a chair rather than standing.⁶ Gregory died on March 12, 604 at the age of about 64. He would join Leo I (see earlier class on Leo) as the only two Popes to get the appellation of "the Great" to their names.

GREGORY'S WRITINGS

Much of what we know about Gregory's views on the Bible, faith, the Church, and life, we find in his writings. Mentioned earlier, his Commentary on Job (termed by its Latin title, *Moralia in Iob*) was a major work without comparison in the church, at least coming from the Pope. The book was started from lessons he taught other clergy while serving as the papal ambassador in Constantinople. The book was finished and assumed its final form later during his papacy.

Rather than try to condense each of Gregory's significant writings into some sense for this lesson, we will look at various topics that Gregory addresses throughout his work in an effort to understand some teaching of this great doctor! Much of this condensation of teaching, along with actual excerpts from Gregory, can be

⁶ The chair of Gregory is still around today in the church of *San Gregorio Magno* ("Saint Gregory the Great Church) in Rome.

found in English in the excellent book, *Gregory the Great* by John Moorhead (Routledge 2005).

GREGORY ON THE BIBLE

The word “Bible” was not yet in common parlance for God’s word. Gregory would refer to our Bible as “holy writings” or “scripture.” He would also use the words “divine utterances.” For Gregory, the Bible was like a letter from God to man. We should see it as the very words of God written by the Holy Spirit using humans merely as the pens for the writings. As such, the Bible should be a source of daily meditation and reflection. For those unable to read the Bible, Gregory thought pictures of Biblical stories should be placed in churches so that people might at least dwell on the stories of the Bible, even when unable to read the actual words.

Gregory found it silly when people raised questions of authorship about certain parts of the Bible. In his commentary on Job, for instance, he does not spend a lot of time discussing who might have written the book. The question of authorship, for Gregory, was “utterly redundant.” The author was the Holy Spirit (although Gregory does believe that Job himself was the pen used by the Holy Spirit to record the text).⁷

Gregory believed in the Bible as a progressive revelation of God. Gregory would assert that over time, God would reveal more and more of himself and the Biblical account would become more and more thorough and complete. Hence, in the older parts of the Bible, God would speak to Abraham. When speaking with Moses, God declared himself the God of Abraham, yet told Moses that God never told Abraham his name! (Ex. 3:6, 6:3) That is not to say that the Bible ever taught one thing in the Old Testament and then something different in the New Testament. For Gregory, the teaching was always the same, what varied was the approach and clarity of the message taught.

Gregory used allegory to understand and teach much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. For New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus, Gregory did not see beyond the historical literal interpretation of the actual events. Still, even in the words and historical deeds of Christ, Gregory frequently could find a spiritual or allegorical lesson. This is interesting to read today, especially in light of Gregory’s penchant for writing and teaching on the more obscure passages in the Bible. For him, the obscurity was itself an indication that some deeper allegorical meaning must be found somewhere. In this vein, Ezekiel was handed a scroll written on the inside and out. This was, for Gregory, a scriptural insight that the

⁷ *Moralia in Iob*, praef. 1f.

Bible itself was written on two sides – a simple, easy-to-read outside that pointed the simple man to God’s rule and direction in life, and a hidden inside of deeper allegorical understanding and insight that offered great treasures to those who diligently sought its lessons.

A good example of Gregory’s approach in this sense is found in his teachings on Ezekiel 1. In the Ezekiel passage, there is a vision of a wheel within a wheel that is beside creatures that have four faces. On this passage, Gregory writes:

What is this thing, spoken of as one wheel, to which is added a little later “like a wheel in the middle of a wheel.” Unless the New Testament, which lay hidden allegorically in the letter of the Old Testament? So it is that the same wheel which appeared beside the living creatures is described as having four faces, because over the two testaments holy scripture is divided into four parts, the Old Testament into the law and the prophets and the New into the gospels and the acts and the sayings of the apostles.⁸

While Gregory could almost be said to luxuriate in the obscurities of scripture, he was never doubtful about the overreaching arch of the Bible. In his own words, “throughout Holy Scripture, God speaks to us with one purpose only, to draw us to love of himself and out neighbor.”⁹

GREGORY ON THE CHURCH

Frequently, Gregory had cause to teach and write in the church. Much like Augustine, Gregory believed that the visible church was full of both the saved and the damned. Gregory was astute enough a historian as well as observant enough in his day to note that the success of the church in the world lent itself to a huge inflow of hypocrites. There were many in the church that were not in the Kingdom of Heaven! These people were readily identifiable by a close examination of their sins and works. But, the ultimate winnowing of the wheat from the chaff would come from God the Judge himself.

That is not to say that Gregory had false perceptions of the powers of sin. Gregory also taught that those who were not able to live lives as sinless as they wished, yet still tried to do so, were still embraced by the church and Jesus himself.¹⁰

⁸ *Sermons in the Prophet Ezekiel*, 1.6.12.

⁹ *Ibid*, 1.10.14

¹⁰ *Moralia in Iob*, 35.18.45.

Gregory's preaching to the church was never too doctrinal. For Gregory, most of the doctrinal fights had already been waged and decisions on orthodoxy established. Gregory felt his role was more to call the church to repentance and holiness. So, many of his sermons come across emphatic on works and deeds. Like Augustine, however, Gregory also insisted on the supremacy of God's grace in salvation. Gregory would write that people could never be saved by the cleanness of their own hands. It is God who must act first within us. We follow of our own free will after God's independent work.¹¹

Gregory had great zeal for evangelism in the church. As we already discussed, in 596 he sent 40 Benedictine Monks to England to evangelize the island. By Christmas of 597, Gregory was able to write that over 10,000 people "placed in a corner of the world" had been baptized by Christmas 597.¹² The "corner" comment was a nice pun in the Latin (Gregory had a penchant for puns). The English people (the "Angles" of "Anglo-Saxon fame) in Latin were called *Anglorum* while the word for "corner" Gregory used was *angulo* (from which we derive "angle" in English – or Angleish).¹³

We do find in the works of Gregory, the concepts of penance for sins as well as purgatory. We have failed to note the developments of these doctrines in the church thus far, but will hopefully cover them as part of future lessons that recap certain doctrinal issues.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 16.25.30.

¹² *Registrum Epistolarum*, 8.29.

¹³ Bede the Venerable wrote the Christian history of the English people a little over a hundred years later. Bede studied Gregory extensively in writing his history, calling Gregory the "Apostle" for the English nation. Bede recounts a story of Gregory before he became Pope at his punning best. Gregory was walking through a slave market and notice some fair haired boys offered for sale. After Gregory twice asked the name of the boys' race, "He was told that they were called *Angli*. 'Good', he said, 'they have the face of angels (a pun the Latin for "angel" is *angeli*), and such men should be fellow-heirs of the angels in heaven'. 'What is the name', he asked, 'of the kingdom from which they have been brought?' He was told that the men were called *Deiri* (An area in Northeast England). '*Deiri*', he replied, '*De ira!* (Another pun. Gregory takes the name of the English province and breaks it into two Latin words that mean the wrath of God.) Good! Snatched from the wrath of Christ and called to his mercy. And what is the name of the king of the land?' He was told that it was Aelle; and playing on the name, he said, 'Alleluia! The praise of God must be sung in those parts.'" (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1) Bede notes this was the tradition handed down through the English peoples as the impetus behind Gregory sending the evangelists to England after he made Pope.

GREGORY ON THE DEVIL

Gregory writes much about Satan, frequently calling him, “the old enemy.” Repeatedly, Gregory refers to Satan’s ultimate downfall as stemming from his arrogance and pride. Satan is seen as already defeated by God, and to Gregory, Satan was diminishing in power day by day as the centuries passed. At his best, Satan wrecked havoc, but always in ways that God could salvage for the good of his will and plan.

We fail to do Gregory justice if we do not note the pithy phraseology in which he wrote. Gregory’s words could be quite thoughtful. For example, “All the earthly things we lose by keeping can be kept by giving them away.”¹⁴ Or, “There is a difference between an earthly and a heavenly building: an earthly building is constructed by gathering together what you have; a heavenly building by scattering what you have.”¹⁵ Gregory would also contrast those who used the things of this world as a steward for God so they could enjoy God, with those who used God in such a manner as to try and enjoy the world.¹⁶

GREGORY ON PASTORAL CARE

In his efforts to better the pastoral care of the clergy for the church, Gregory wrote four books in the early part of his papacy dealing specifically with pastoral care. In these books, Gregory first set out the type of person that should be a pastor and the motives for that person. Gregory follows that with a discussion of the virtues that should be found in pastors. Then, Gregory discusses 40 different personality types and how to preach to each. Finally, Gregory considers how Pastors should keep their own consciences clean to aid them in ministering to others.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Christianity is based on historical events. God became man, he died and was resurrected to redeem his people. We should embrace that faith, not because it is convenient, nor because it is socially acceptable. We should embrace it because it is true. “And we are in Him who is true – even in His son Jesus Christ, He is the true God and eternal life.” (1 John 5:20)

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 18.18.28

¹⁵ *Sermons in the Prophet Ezekiel*, 37.6

¹⁶ *Moralia in Iob*, 2.9.15.

2. Then, we should see that faith transform our lives. We should live as those living to please our God, not ourselves. “Live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.” (1 Thes. 4:1).
3. We can live lives of strong faith, just like Gregory. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Heb. 13:8). Someday may people say about our generation, as Paul wrote about the Romans, “your faith is being reported all over the world” (Rom. 1:8).
4. Do not let poor health be an excuse for not accomplishing things for the Lord. Both Gregory and the apostle Paul had serious health problems. Paul wrote, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12: 7–10).