

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 21

The Desert Fathers

Last week, Becky and I had the pleasure of visiting a hermitage in the Ozark Mountains for lunch and a brief tour. It was very interesting to those coming from Protestant Evangelical roots. We had a brief prayer service before the lunch. The food, which was quite delicious, was very simple and homegrown. Fresh vegetables from the garden and cold water from the well was complimented by the chicken roasted in the kitchen after being “grabbed and processed” from the hermitage’s chicken coop.

During the tour, we were shown how the hermitage was set up so that the newer folks stayed closer to the common buildings and those who were further along in their growth on the hermit path moved to the outlying areas.

Where did the hermit movement get its start? What exactly is a hermit? Why are there hermits? What is the Biblical basis for “hermiting”? We are at the time line in Church history where we should properly address some of these issues!

WHAT IS A HERMIT?

We get our word “hermit” from the Greek *eremites* (ερημιτης). It is a noun that comes from the Greek stem for “desert” or “uninhabited.” It can literally be translated as a “desert-dweller.” A hermit, historically, is someone who chose a desert life of relative solitude and ascetic living in an effort to find greater spiritual purity and closer fellowship with God.

We might use the word “hermit” today to refer to anyone who is a recluse, removed from ordinary society. That is not true to the root of the word. The word is rooted in spiritual purpose.

Our examination of the hermit life properly begins with the “desert fathers” of the church. We will focus closely on St. Antony the Great. He may not be the first hermit, but he certainly is seen as one of the founders and the key person in the monastic movement that grew out of his hermit life.

Our principal source for the life of St. Antony is the biography written by Athanasius (more on him next week!). Athanasius wrote “*The Life of St. Antony*” just 2 years after Antony’s death. We find in its pages the story of a man whom most scholars consider the founder of Christian monasticism.

Athanasius got his information from personal visits with Antony over the years as well as from others who knew Antony.¹

THE LIFE OF ST. ANTONY

Antony was born around the year 250 to parents that “were of good stock and well-to-do.” His parents were Christians and so they naturally reared Antony as one. Antony was quite close to his parents, and he paid close attention to what they taught him. He was never a social child, preferring instead to stay near his home and parents to being at school and playing with children (1).²

When Antony was 18 or 20, his parents both died, leaving him with a good size estate and the care of his little sister. Six months or so later, Antony was headed to church thinking about how the Apostles left everything to follow Jesus. He considered how the early church sold all it had and held the possessions in common. Once Antony got to church, the gospel reading was from Matthew 19:21 where Jesus said, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

To Antony, this reading seemed to be a message straight from God to him, in response to Antony’s thoughts prior to the service. Almost immediately, Antony left the church and took the land he had (roughly 207 acres, a *good* size farm in that day) and gave it to the townspeople. He sold most of the rest of his possessions, and kept back just a bit to take care of his sister (2).

After this, Antony went back to church where the reading was from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (Mt. 6:34). Antony took this commandment to heart and decided he needed to give to the poor even the few things he had left. Antony did so, and gave his little sister to the care of some nuns³ he knew and trusted.

From that point on, Antony devoted the rest of his life as an ascetic, living a life of self-denial. At first, Antony sought out wisdom from other ascetics who he found living on the outskirts of towns.

¹ Athanasius actually gave Antony the clothes Antony was wearing at the time of his death. Antony had the cloak returned to Athanasius as his only possession upon passing away.

² These citations in parenthesis refer to the paragraphs in Athanasius’s *The Life of St. Antony*.

³ The word translated by Meyer as “nuns” is the Greek *Parthenon* (παρθενων), which basically means a group of virgins. Meyer cites this as the first occurrence of the word in the sense of a house or group of virgins dedicated to Christ (Meyer at 107).

He observed the graciousness of one, the earnestness at prayer in another; studied the even temper of one and kindheartedness of another; fixed his attention on the vigils⁴ kept by one and on the studies pursued by another; admired another for his patient endurance, another for his fasting and sleeping on the ground; watched closely this man's meekness and the forbearance shown by another; and in one and all alike he marked especially devotion and the love they had for one another. Having thus taken his fill, he would return to his own place of asceticism. (Chapter 4)

Antony spent his days in prayer and doing private manual labor, recognizing the scripture 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." With the money he earned, he would spend a portion on bread, the remaining funds he would give to the poor.

He did not keep books, but committed large portions of scripture to memory. He would also spend his days in constant prayer, in light of Paul's command to "pray continually" (1 Thes. 5:17).

A good bit of the *Life of St. Antony* deals with demonology and Antony's struggles with demons and their temptations. As Athanasius saw it, Satan "could not bear to see such resolution in a young man" and so set about using his "customary tactics" against Antony.

The "customary tactics" of Satan included family concerns (his sister), the love of money, the love of fame, the "myriad pleasures of eating," along with other concerns for comfort. This was considered Satan's effort to get Antony to give up his ascetic life. Antony "vanquished" those thoughts and temptations by faith and constant prayer.

Rather than give up, Satan shifted into overdrive! "The Enemy would suggest filthy thoughts," but Antony would again dissolve them by prayer. Satan would "try to incite him to lust," but Antony would withstand the temptation through his faith, prayers, and fasting.

The net result was to put the Enemy to shame. Satan being beaten by a small man was a victory worth being proud of! Of course, that pride would have then been Satan's victory! So instead, Antony and Athanasius saw the victory as the Lord's. "Thus all who fight in earnest can say: 'Not I, but the grace of God with me'" (1 Cor. 15:10).

⁴ A "vigil" was a time of staying awake at night instead of sleeping in devotion and dedication to God.

Over several chapters, the constant confrontation of Satan and his demons against Antony is detailed. Every time Antony wins over Satan (and the credit is given to God over and over, usually quoting a scripture as well), the Enemy regroupes and comes back again. Satan is seen as a lion waiting for the chance to pounce. Antony was prepared for this because scripture set out Satan with just such a description (1 Pet. 5:8). So Antony was careful to protect not only his body, but also his mind. He constantly chose to mortify his body making his life more and more austere⁵ out of zeal for what was right.

Sometimes, Antony would sing in response to demon attack. One song we are told he sang came from Psalm 27:3, “Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear.” Another song was from Psalm 68, “May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him....” Antony would also speak out against Satan, “I am not cowed by your blows, and even though you should give me more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ!”

Many of the temptations and struggles with Satan have a clear supernatural element to them. Satan and his demons would appear in the forms of animals or even a seductress. Satan would provide an appearance of gold or silver on the road when Antony was headed out for time of special contemplation and prayer. When Antony would discern that the riches were an apparition of the Deceiver, the gold and silver would vanish.

Later in his life, while teaching demonology to other monks, Antony would draw on the lessons he learned at his time. He taught that we should constantly be on our guard. He quoted Paul, saying “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12).

Antony was emphatic that demons and Satan have no power over the believer. They try to keep believers from mounting to the heavenly realms from which they have fallen. Demons and Satan attempt to do so with stumbling blocks and temptations, but these can be withstood through prayer, faith, and fasting.

Antony did note that there were times where the demons seemed to have an ability to read the future and predict things to come. Antony thought that this was not necessarily an amazing power. For example, when the “future” was told to Antony that a certain Christian brother was coming to see him, and then the brother showed up several days later, Antony considered the answer rather

⁵ The scripture reference for this was 1 Cor. 9:27 where Paul writes, “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

obvious. The demons would see the brother leaving, or hear that the brother was going to leave, and then could come in all haste, traveling demonically through the air much quicker than the brother by ground! So what seemed a miraculous foretelling was really a ruse.

Antony used scripture to show that demons could quote scripture to their own wicked effect. They even confess Jesus as the Son of God, but are not to be listened to!

Over and over, we see Antony's concern that a danger, even though it seems "normal," likely involves some element of the supernatural. For example, one time when Antony was keeping vigil alone in the desert (*i.e.*, staying awake in prayer and devotion sacrificing sleep), hyenas encircled him, mouths agape threatening to bite him. Antony proclaimed loudly, "If you have received the power to do this against me, I am ready to be devoured by you; if you have been sent by demons, get out without delay, for I am Christ's servant."

This was consistent with Antony's view of the limited power of Satan. Using Job as a reference, Antony taught that demons do not have power to hurt believers unless God grants them that power. Should God grant the Enemy that power, then we have nothing to fear because God is in control. If God does not grant the power, then we have nothing to fear because the name and cross of Jesus can drive away any demon. Antony never seems to think that God might be "unfair" in allowing Satan to bring pain his way. Of course, there really was not much Satan could do to Antony beyond killing him, sickening him, or scaring him. In light of the way he lived his life, believing he would die any day, gladly suffering physically for his faith, with no possessions or belongings, with no relationships of closeness beyond those who upon death see the Savior, it seems the greatest "harm" Satan could have ever inflicted on Antony would have been to get Antony to turn back on the ascetic way of life. The enemy could have done the most damage by getting Antony to receive and keep things, rather than give away to the poor!

Antony ate basic bread, and salt. He drank only water. He never would have considered eating meat or drinking wine. Generally, he would sleep on the bare ground, though occasionally he slept on a mat made of rushes. Antony was fond of quoting Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong"(2 Cor. 12:10). Antony made up his own saying, "the soul's energy thrives when the body's desires are feeblest."

Antony wore the same clothes day in day out, year in year out. He never bathed his body or washed his feet. He would never let anyone see him naked in any way. This he considered part of his "daily martyrdom."

Antony would frequently appeal to Elijah the prophet as his example for an ascetic life. We read in 1 Kings about Elijah living in the desert on his own. He would come in to prophesy and give the word of the Lord, but time and time again, we find him in the desert living a simple life.

Much like Elijah, Antony would spend a great deal of time in solitude, rarely seeing or interacting with others. He spent time closed up in a tomb, time in deserted buildings, and time in the open. In the private abandoned “fort” (really little more than a building), Antony actually barricaded himself in. He would store up a 6-month supply of bread and then either someone brought replenishment, or he would go get another 6-month supply when he ran out. His friends would come to seek his wisdom or inquire about his safety, and he would answer. For a long period of time though, he would not come out and see people face to face.

Athanasius notes that Antony stayed this way for nearly 20 years until some friends forcefully broke down the door and removed it. Antony came out “as one initiated into the holy mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God.” His body appeared much the same as before he locked himself in, neither emaciated nor obese.

As Antony came out from the seclusion, it seemed to all that he was pure of soul and “completely under control,” neither embarrassed nor excited to see people. Athanasius says God healed many sick through Antony. Both those sick physically and those sick of spirit found healing and comfort from him.

So many people were amazed at the life of Antony that they took up the monastic calling themselves. Monasteries “sprang up in the mountains and the desert was populated with monks who left their own people (14). Antony frequently spoke to those monks, giving them his insight and encouragement. Athanasius records a number of the teachings of Antony.

When teaching the monks, Antony was clear, “The Scriptures are really sufficient for our instruction” (16). Nevertheless, he added that it was good to encourage each other and to follow models in the faith. In that regard, Antony told the monks to start all over each day, working to increase their zeal from what it had been before. The monks were not to grow weary in their ascetic devotion. Rather, they were to remember the writings of Paul, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

Antony considered the ascetic life really insignificant in a way. All the pleasures of the world he gave up seemed irrelevant to him. He taught that even if he had the whole world, it was “a very trifling thing compared to all of Heaven” (17). Accordingly, the ascetic should never boast. For what he gave up is “practically nothing” compared to heaven.

The things everyone was going after would eventually be given up anyway. They were not going to be taken into the hereafter. Antony thought it much more sensible to spend time acquiring virtue (“justice, temperance, fortitude, understanding, charity, love of the poor, faith in Christ, meekness, hospitality,” *etc.*) These were things of eternal value.

Antony urged the monks to live each day as if they were to die that day. They were never to look back, but to press on. In this way, they were to learn the lesson of Lot’s wife. As Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Lk 9:62).

In 311, before Constantine’s rise to the Emperorship, Maximin put out a period of intense persecution for the church. In Egypt, there were a number of martyrdoms. Antony left his desert dwelling to come into Egypt and seek either to minister to the martyrs or to become one himself. As Athanasius writes it, God’s plan was not for Antony to become a martyr. God had other plans for Antony. So, Antony ministered to those who were being martyred until the time of persecution passed.

At various times throughout his “career,” many would come to Antony privately and in groups for advice and teaching. Beyond the teaching to monks set out earlier, Antony would urge those who sought his counsel:

to place their confidence in the Lord and to love Him, to keep themselves from bad thoughts and pleasures of the flesh...They should flee conceit and pray continually, sing Psalms before sleeping and after, commit to heart the commandments enjoined in the scriptures, and hark back to the deeds of the saints (55).

Among those who came was the Emperor Constantine himself (Okay, Constantine came by mail, writing to Antony. He did not physically visit!). While others were amazed that the Emperor would write, Antony was not! Antony said, “You must not be surprised if an Emperor writes to us, for he is a man; but you should rather be surprised that God has written the law for mankind and has spoken to us through His own Son” (81).

Athanasius records a number of miracles Antony wrought. Whether healing the sick and infirm, visions and insights, or providing water in the desert, the consistent point in every miracle was that Antony was NOT the one performing the miracle. God was always the miracle worker and all credit was properly His (56-64).

Antony was in his holy walk at the height of the Arian controversy (see earlier lesson on Nicea). Antony left his desert monasticism to come into Egypt and condemn the heresy about the nature of Christ. Athanasius has Antony pulling no punches about how wrong and dangerous the heresy was. Antony considered it a forerunner to the teachings of the Antichrist.

There were two monks present with Antony when his death finally arrived. Antony was nearly 105 years old. He called them in and gave them final words of encouragement. Antony made them commit that his body would be buried in an unknown location, and then “with a look as though friends had come to him and he was overjoyed at the sight of them – for as he lay there, his face had a cheerful look – he passed away and was gathered to his fathers” (92).

So ended the remarkable life of a man who, as Athanasius noted, “gained renown not for his writings, nor for worldly wisdom, nor for any art, but solely for his service of God” (93). By the way, Athanasius does tell us that Antony’s sister grew into a wonderful woman of God who became the head nun/virgin taking care of other such women until the end of her days.

Many monks and monasteries would come later – some more extreme, some less. But all owe a debt to Antony, the Father of monasticism.

POINTS FOR HOME

So what do we make of this? We do not really have an example of a life like Antony’s in the Bible. Yet, we do have some glimpses into many who held some of Antony’s traits and practices. We have already mentioned Elijah. Even in Moses, we find someone who found truth and God’s purpose from years spent in the desert. The Israelites themselves were purified through 40 years of wilderness warnings. John the Baptist was a wilderness guy. Jesus not only spent 40 days of fasting in the wilderness confronting the temptations of Satan, but he would also frequently find time to slip away from crowds for solitude and prayer.

Throughout the lesson, I have tried to integrate some of the scriptures that guided this choice for Antony. He took some scriptures quite literally for which we seem to find other “meanings” (example: Go sell everything you have and give to the poor). These scriptures certainly have validity for Antony, and yet they do for us as well.

Might I suggest that the ascetic way of life is a calling? Could it be that some are called to this extreme commitment? Yet, we do know that Jesus himself spent time right in the middle of folks, young and old alike. Unquestionably part of the commission to go into the world preaching the good news includes interaction on a level that Antony seemed to miss.

That we are not ascetics or hermits does not relieve the rest of believers from a careful observation of commitment and stewardship. It does not mean that the rest of us shouldn't carefully consider whether we are living for this life or the one to come. Are we following the scriptures and keeping our priorities straight? While there are areas of Antony's life that are extreme and out of balance, there are other aspects that can serve as a wake up call for our focus.

1. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things [what you eat, what you wear] will be given to you as well (Mt. 6:33).
2. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil (Ps 23:1, 4).
3. Let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Heb. 12:1).