

Athanasius and the Trinity

Review:

- **James, Peter, Paul** (The Worthiness of Christ)
- **Polycarp** (The Faithfulness of Christ)
- **Perpetua** (The Love of God)
- **Constantine** (The Sovereignty of God)

Introduction: Alexander looking upon the sea.¹

One fine day in Alexandria, Egypt the church was celebrating a feast in memory of their beloved bishop Peter who had been martyred under the reign of Diocletian—his death having taken place right before the legalization of Christianity in the empire. Having presided over the morning portion of the feast and remembrance day, Alexander, the then bishop of Alexandria, waited by the sea for some guests he was expecting for breakfast.

While he was waiting, he looked out over the Mediterranean Sea and saw something amusing. He saw a group of children playing on the beach and imitating him, the bishop, and the ordinances of the church. A smile crept across Alexander's face as he watched a young boy imitate the gesticulations of a preacher as he spoke to his friends. His friends themselves wore solemn, serious faces as they received this instruction from the make-believe bishop.

The smile faded and his heart dropped when Alexander saw the children walk into the water and receive baptism from this young boy. After this, Alexander intervened. He called the children to himself and, along with a few others from the church, questioned them about the games they were playing. Alexander wanted to know if the children had an accurate understanding of what they were imitating. Baptism is a big deal—were they making a mockery of it and bringing reproach upon themselves?

When pressed about the details, the children confessed that the young boy who had been officiating followed the exact routine of the church—even down to the precise language used in the catechism and baptism services. You see, these children had been evangelized, disciplined, and baptized by the same young boy—he was their ring leader. Alexander then, did not rebuke this young boy but instead received the approval of his family to take him as his apprentice and secretary. The name of this young man was Athanasius.

This morning, we will follow the story of this young boy, Athanasius. Along the way we touch on the doctrine that Athanasius labored to defend and establish for the good of the church and the glory of God. Specifically, we will see that he argued for the eternity of Jesus Christ. That is, to put it negatively, he refuted the heretics who said that there was a time when Jesus did not exist.

I. Athanasius's Early Life:²

- **Early Life**
 - Born c. 296 into a Christian home in Alexandria, Egypt.

¹Adapted from Sozomen, "The Ecclesiastical History of Salaminus Hermias Sozomenus," in *Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Chester D. Hartranft, vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 269-270.

²Inspiration taken from Michael Reeve's Lecture: *Deep Refreshment from the Past (Pt 4)*. Accessed from: "<https://share.google/PO0j3Ze9Izamcv8iC>

- Not much else is known about his family, however.
- **Raised in Alexander's house in Alexandria**
 - Alexander raised him in his own house, oversaw his education, and had a view of dedicating Athanasius to the ministry.
 - Served as a deacon in the church of Alexandria.
 - According to Greg N.:
 - "We have no account of the studies pursued by Athanasius in his youth, except the vague statement of Gregory Nazianzen, **that he devoted comparatively little attention to general literature, but acquired an extraordinary knowledge of the Scriptures.**"³
 - To a large degree, he was self taught.

Things were going swimmingly for Athanasius until one day his mentor and friend Alexander was teaching the group of the assembled elders from the churches of Alexandria about the Trinity.

II. Athanasius Contra Arius

- **What is Arianism?**
 - Alexander undertook in the presence of his elders and the rest of the clergy, with perhaps too much philosophical minuteness, to explain the great theological mystery of the unity of the Trinity.
 - *By unity of the Trinity we mean that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity. We don't confuse the persons of the Trinity or divide the one essence of God.⁴ God is three and yet one; one and yet three.*
 - A church historian records that "A certain one of the presbyters under his jurisdiction, whose name was Arius" spoke up and said, "If," said he, 'the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he had his subsistence³ from nothing.'"
 - *What Arius was teaching was as follows:*
 - (P1) *The Father begat the Son.*
 - (P2) *Those who are begat have a beginning.*
 - (C1) *The Son had a beginning.*
 - (C2) *There was a time when the Son was not*
 - (C3) *The Father and the Son do not share the same divine essence.*
 - Essentially, they taught that Jesus was not eternally God.
 - "Understanding 'begetting' as equivalent to 'creating,' Arius taught that Jesus Christ was not derived from the substance of the Father, but, as the first and highest of

³John Morell Mackenzie, "ATHANA'SIUS (Ἀθανάσιος), ST.," in *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, ed. William Smith (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1870), 394.

⁴Athanasian Creed.

God's creations, became the instrument of all the rest of creation."⁵

- **Arius**

- Arius was a presbyter (elder) in the city of Alexandria. Particularly, he served at a gathering that met by the harbor.
- He was born in Libya and was already a popular preacher in Alexandria by the time the events described below took place.
- Result: "[Arius, h]aving drawn this inference from his novel train of reasoning, he excited many to a consideration of the question; and thus from a little spark a large fire was kindled: for the evil which began in the Church at Alexandria, ran throughout all Egypt, Libya, and the upper Thebes, and at length diffused itself over the rest of the provinces and cities. Many others also adopted the opinion of Arius"⁶
 - Arius's clever marketing. Songs. Rival choirs of heretical music.
- In response, Alexander excommunicated Arius.

- **What are the implications?**

Alexander's letter to the bishops of the cities in the region: "The dogmas they have invented and assert, contrary to the Scriptures, are these:

- God was not always the Father, there was a period of time when he was not the Father;
- The Word of God (the Son) was not from eternity;
- The Son is a creature and a work;
- The Son is not like the Father as regards his essence;
- The Son is not the true Word or Wisdom of God;
- The Son is able to change;
- The Son does not understand the Father;
- The Son cannot accurately see the Father;
- The Son does not know his own essence;
- The Son was made on our account, so that we may exist.

What Arius had made by this misinterpretation of the word "begotten" was a false god. The singular god that he described did not at all correspond to the true God revealed in the Bible. Despite this, many were deceived.

Alexander: "...they shall not prevail, for the truth must triumph; and 'light has no fellowship with darkness, nor has Christ any concord with Belial.' Who ever heard such blasphemies? or what man of any piety is there now hearing them that is not horror-struck, and stops his ears, lest the filth of these expressions should pollute his sense of hearing? Who that hears John saying, 'In the beginning was the Word,' does not condemn those that say, 'There was a period when the Word was not'? or who, hearing in the Gospel of 'the only-begotten Son,' and that 'all things were made by him,' will not abhor those that pronounce the Son to be one of the things made? How can he

⁵Ferguson, 193.

⁶Socrates, 3.

be one of the things which were made by himself? Or how can he be the only-begotten, if he is reckoned among created things? ...Or how is he unlike the Father's essence, who is 'his perfect image,' and 'the brightness of his glory'⁷ and says: 'He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father'?⁷

- Reaction to Alexander's letter: contention in the cities. Some "indeed fully concurred in and subscribed to the sentiments expressed in this letter, while others did the reverse... To so disgraceful an extent was this affair carried, that Christianity became a subject of popular ridicule, even in the very theatres."⁸
- In every city, "bishop was contending against bishop, and the people were contending against one another, like swarms of gnats fighting in the air."⁹

- **Constantine Intervenes**

- Emperor Constantine was saddened by the disunity that this created in the empire. He wrote an open letter to Alexander and Arius asking them to be restored to one another out of reverence for God. Constantine even pleaded with them to forgive one another so that he could have "nights free from care"¹⁰
- As good as it sounds, this was not effective. There was still widespread disagreement among the bishops and the people in general throughout Christendom—particularly in the East.

- **Council of Nicea**

To put the fire out, Constantine convened the Council of Nicea and urged the divided parties to agree with one another. "An overwhelming majority of the bishops did not agree with Arius..."¹¹

- **One Essence** (*Homoousios, Consubstantialis*)
 - Athanasius served alongside Alexander at the council and boldly refuted the Arian representatives who spoke.
 - The council adopted the language of God having one essence shared by both the Father and the Son. This eliminated Arian teaching and affirmed that Jesus Christ was fully God, sharing in some way the divine nature as the Father.¹²
 - This was not a lasting solution, however.
 - *The beef intensified.*

I liken this to Star Wars Episode IV. The Death Star had been destroyed but then the empire...struck back.

⁷Socrates, 4.

⁸Socrates, 5.

⁹Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "Athanasius," in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 18.

¹⁰Socrates, 7.

¹¹Ferguson, 194.

¹²Ferguson, 194.

III. Athanasius Contra Mundum

- **Athanasius as bishop of Alexandria**

- The year following the council of Nicea, Alexander died and strongly urged the church in Alexandria to select Athanasius as the next bishop.
- Though he was somewhat reluctant and young, Athanasius accepted the responsibility on the insistence of Alexander.

- **Ecclesiology note about polity**

- What is a bishop?
- Why do we not have bishops?
 - The New Testament teaches us that the church is to be overseen by elders who love and shepherd the flock together. Further, it is to be served by deacons who care for the material needs of the church.
- This system that the early church created was not biblical.

- **Arius Reinstated by Constantine**

- Shortly after Athanasius was installed as the bishop of Alexandria, certain persons in the empire had taken it upon themselves to persuade Constantine that Arius should be reinstated in the church. Arius even signed a modified version of the Nicene Creed. Being persuaded, Constantine ordered Arius to be restored to fellowship in Alexandria.
- Athanasius refused. He did this because Arius had not actually repented of his idolatrous lies.
- After his refusal Athanasius was groundlessly accused of murder, illegal taxation, sorcery, and treason.¹³ He was even accused of stopping the exportation of grain from Egypt.
- At every turn, he was prosecuted and bullied by the Arians and the empire. Often his life was threatened.

Year	Description of Exile ¹⁴
335-37	Deposed by the Council of Tyre, he was sent by Constantine to Trier.
339-46	Banished by Constantius as still canonically deposed, he went to Rome.
356-61	Outlawed again by Constantius, he went into hiding among the monks in the deserts of Egypt, from which he was able to direct the affairs of his church.
363	Exiled by Julian, he was concealed again in Egypt.
365-66	Forced to leave the city by Valens, he found refuge once again in the Egyptian desert.
<i>Nearly sixteen of his forty-five years in the episcopate were spent in exile. He died in 373.</i>	

¹³Galli and Olsen, 18.

¹⁴Table adapted from Ferguson, 204.

While he was in exile, Athanasius was constantly writing to refute the Arian heresy. It is no surprise then that his opponents came at him, his teachings, and his people in Alexandria with violence.

- **Escape from Syrianus (3rd Exile)**

It was now night, and some of the people were keeping a vigil preparatory to a communion on the morrow, when the General Syrianus suddenly came upon us with more than five thousand soldiers, having arms and drawn swords, bows, spears, and clubs, as I have related above. With these he surrounded the Church, stationing his soldiers near at hand, in order that no one might be able to leave the Church and pass by them. Now I considered that it would be unreasonable in me to desert the people during such a disturbance, and not to endanger myself in their behalf; therefore I sat down upon my throne, and desired the Deacon to read a Psalm, and the people to answer, 'For His mercy endureth for ever,' and then all to withdraw and depart home. But the General having now made a forcible entry, and the soldiers having surrounded the sanctuary for the purpose of apprehending us, the Clergy and those of the laity, who were still there, cried out, and demanded that we too should withdraw. But I refused, declaring that I would not do so, until they had retired one and all. Accordingly I stood up, and having bidden prayer, I then made my request of them, that all should depart before me, saying that it was better that my safety should be endangered, than that any of them should receive hurt. So when the greater part had gone forth, and the rest were following, the monks who were there with us and certain of the Clergy came up and dragged us away. And thus (Truth is my witness), while some of the soldiers stood about the sanctuary, and others were going round the Church, we passed through, under the Lord's guidance, and with His protection withdrew without observation, greatly glorifying God that we had not betrayed the people, but had first sent them away, and then had been able to save ourselves, and to escape the hands of them which sought after us.¹⁵

- **Escape on the Nile (4th Exile)**

But he fled again, saying to his intimates, 'Let us retire for a little while, friends; it is but a small cloud which will soon pass away.' He then immediately embarked, and crossing the Nile, hastened with all speed into Egypt, closely pursued by those who sought to take him. When he understood that his pursuers were not far distant, his attendants were urging him to retreat once more into the desert, but he had recourse to an artifice and thus effected his escape. He persuaded those who accompanied him to turn back and meet his adversaries, which they did immediately; and on approaching them they were simply asked 'where they had seen Athanasius': to which they replied that 'he was not a great way off,' and, that 'if they hastened they would soon overtake him.' Being thus deluded, they started afresh in pursuit with quickened speed, but to no purpose; and Athanasius making good his retreat, returned secretly to Alexandria;¹⁶

¹⁵Athanasius of Alexandria, "Defence of His Flight," in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Miles Atkinson and Archibald T. Robertson, vol. 4, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 263–264.

¹⁶Socrates, 86.

IV. Athanasius, Champion of Orthodoxy

- **What motivated his continued obedience?**

- Defending the glory of the Trinity—the God of his beloved Scriptures—was the fuel for Athanasius’s life. “Athanasius’s steadfastness and his writings blocked the Arians’ progress and prepared for the eventual victory of the Nicene cause.”¹⁷
- If there was a time when the Son was not:

1. There would be no Trinity (Mt 28:19-20; Deut 6:4; Jn 10:30; Heb 1:1-4)

- Baptize them in the name (*singular*) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*three persons*).
- Jesus himself gave us the command to be baptized into this reality of God’s unity and threeness. This is our profession of faith as commanded by our Lord himself. We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity.
- If there was ever a time when the Son was not, this would destroy the unity of the Trinity, undermine the entirety of the Scripture, and stand against Jesus’s clear command.
- *For this reason alone, Arius’s claim and all its implications ought to be utterly rejected. But there are still more reasons...*

2. There would be no trinitarian love—just solitary, eternal coldness (Jn 17:4-5, 23-24)

- When we search the Scripture, we find that in a few places God tells us what he was doing in eternity past. I want to draw your attention to two such descriptions in Jesus’s prayer in John 17.
- In John 17:4-5, Jesus asks the Father to glorify him “*with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*”
- What was Jesus and the Father and, of course, the Holy Spirit doing in eternity past before the world existed? They were sharing in glory together. Why? Because they are coequal in glory, coequal in majesty. They are three persons and yet share one essence; one essence yet three persons.
- Let’s take a look at John 17:23-24. Here, Jesus asks the Father to love the church with the love with which he has loved Jesus. That in itself is astounding, but it gets gooder. He also asks that “*they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world*” (Jn 17:24).
- What was the Father doing for all eternity past? He was loving the Son.
- You see, God, from all eternity has been “perfectly complete in a triune fellowship of love.”¹⁸

¹⁷Ferguson, 206.

¹⁸Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 68.

- God never lacks anything, he never has and he never will. God did not create because he had a need that needed fulfillment. He created because he desired for his creatures to share in and delight themselves fully in his oceans of love.
 - Susanna Wesley (1738): “He is being itself, and as such must necessarily be infinitely happy in the glorious perfections of his nature from everlasting to everlasting; and as he did not create, so neither did he redeem because he needed us; but he loved us because he loved us.”¹⁹
 - “God is love,’ as John says, and Christ is love covered over with flesh, yea, our flesh.”²⁰
 - Because the Son is eternally God, we are swept up into the eternal love of the Trinity
3. There would be no trinitarian shape to the gospel (Rom 5:1-5)
- “[S]alvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity.”²¹
 - Through faith in Jesus Christ, we have peace with God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1).
 - How does Paul usually begin his letters? Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Unqualified uses of “God” in the New Testament very often, if not exclusively, refer to God the Father.
 - This peace is so great that it triumphs over our sufferings. Why? Because it produces hope in us *“and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”* (Rom 5:5).
 - Do you see it? *We enjoy peace with the Father through the Son and by the Spirit.*
 - “Nothing we do as evangelicals makes sense if it is divorced from a strong experiential and doctrinal grasp of the coordinated work of Jesus and the Spirit, worked out against the horizon of the Father’s love.”²²
 - *Look for these structures in the New Testament, you will find them all over the place!*
4. Christ would not be able to save us (Heb 2:14-18, 4:14-16, 10:22-23)
- In Hebrews 2:14-18 we are reminded that Jesus became truly human, being made like us in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest. *Jesus is truly human.*
 - In Hebrews 4:14-16 we are reminded that Jesus is forever the true Son of God. Because he is God, he calls us to himself before the throne of grace—an honor that only God can give. *Jesus is truly God.*

¹⁹Sanders, 67.

²⁰Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 116.

²¹Sanders, 15.

²²Sanders, 15.

- The result is that in 10:22-23 through Jesus Christ, our great high priest who is truly man and truly God, we may draw near to God. Not in fear, not cringing as we anticipate a blow upon our heads. But we may draw near “in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22). We may be completely assured of God’s love for us in Christ by the Spirit. So then, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23).
- Athanasius argued that “only one who was fully human could atone for human sin; only one who was fully divine could have the power to save us. To Athanasius, the logic of New Testament doctrine of salvation assumed the dual nature of Christ. **‘Those who maintain ‘There was a time when the Son was not’ rob God of his Word, like plunderers.’**”²³

Athanasius was not content for God to be robbed before his eyes. So he stood on the Word of God and he stood for the biblical understanding of the Trinity even though the whole world was against him. Though he died in 373, his impact is still felt today. In 381, the Council of Constantinople met under emperor Theodosius I and Arianism was again refuted. This time the battle was decisive. Christ’s and the Holy Spirit’s full deity was affirmed from the Scripture.

May we also stand on the Word of God and may we glory in the Triune God who has revealed himself in its pages. Let us take for our very own the love of the Father through the Son by the Spirit so that by the Spirit we may worship through the Son to the glory of the Father.

Conclusion

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14).

²³Galli and Olsen, 18.