

Athanasius in 30 minutes

Timeline

- 296? Athanasius born in Alexandria, Egypt
- 305-11 Terrible persecution in Egypt
- 312 Emperor Constantine converts to Christianity
- 318 Arius begins to teach that the Son was created
- 325 Council of Nicea (in modern Turkey)
"God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten not made, of the same being of the Father"
- 328 Athanasius appointed bishop of Alexandria
- 335-7 Exile 1 (to modern Germany)
- 337-61 Emperor Constantinus (Arian)
- 339-46 Exile 2 (to Rome)
- 356-62 Exile 3 (in the Egyptian desert)
- 361-63 Emperor Julian (pagan)
- 362 Council of Alexandria discusses 'same' or 'like' being
- 362-4 Exile 4 (in the Egyptian desert)
- 365-6 Exile 5 (in his father's tomb)
- 369 39th Festal Letter – 27 books of the NT canon
- 373 Athanasius dies
- 381 Council of Constantinople confirms Nicene Creed

Main writings

Against the Heathen and *On the Incarnation*

Against the Arians

Letters to Serapion

Life of Anthony

Life

African man, born in Alexandria – which was then the intellectual capital of the world and one of the biggest centres of Christianity in the world.

Time of persecution – worst ever seen in the Roman Empire - saw lots of his parent's generation killed. 1000s men, women and children - burnt to death, tortured to death, drowned in the sea, beheaded, crucified upside down, starved to death, torn apart – the Roman soldiers got so sick of it that in the end they resorted to 'lesser' punishments of cutting off hands or feet or gouging out their eyes.

That's what Athanasius saw growing up but it didn't put him off - he became a ministry apprentice to the bishop of Alexandria – a great man called Alexander (Alexander of Alexandria) – and Alexander took Athanasius through a brilliant ministry training course.

When Athanasius was about 22 one of the pastors in the city – man called Arius – started teaching that the Son was not eternal – he had been created by God and the Son then went on to create the world – so he was a very high being but not true God.

Bishop Alexander and all the other African bishops weren't having any of this – and they threw out Arius as a heretic – he ran off to Turkey where he'd had his theological training and where there was more support for his views.

Roman Emperor Constantine has had his vision of the Cross by this time and declared the empire Christian – so he calls the Council of Nicea – hoping to unite Christendom – bishop Alexander and his apprentice Athanasius go along – there’s a big discussion of Arius’ views and the vast majority are horrified by this new teaching and they come out with a statement which is now called the Nicene Creed – which includes the lines:

“And in one Lord Jesus Christ... God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Begotten not made, of the same being of the Father”

A few years later Bishop Alexander dies and Athanasius is appointed to succeed him but he’s got enemies - friends of Arius – and they come up with the most amazing accusations – they say Athanasius (1) bribed his way into being bishop; (2) murdered another bishop called Arsenius; (3) dismembered the body and was using one of his severed hands to do black magic!

At the trial the hand is produced as evidence – Arsenius though was in hiding – he’s found and brought to the trial under a cloak – revealed alive, then reveal his hands – “Where did the 3rd hand come from?” But amazingly it’s such a corrupt trial Athanasius convicted and exiled.

Rest of his life – you can see on the timeline is a story of being exiled, allowed to return when the politics changed, exiled again, returns, exiled again. Loads of wonderful stories – one time being chased down the Nile on boat – and he said turn the boat round – as passed the pursuers they say, “Have you seen Athanasius?” he says, “He is not far off” and glides by back to Alexandria.

What can we learn from Athanasius?

1. Fearless

One time the Emperor Constantinus – who was an Arian – sent 5000 soldiers to get Athanasius and silence him once and for all – bit like Elisha and the Syrians. Athanasius is in his church ministering to the people and suddenly heavily armed soldiers burst in – arrows flying, swords slashing – Athanasius calmly tells all his congregation to get out and he will stay – they’ve come for him and he doesn’t want anyone else to get hurt – but his friends forcibly smuggle him out and hide him in the desert with the monks, moving him on every time the army gets close. But point is, Athanasius is doesn’t fear death *because* he is completely wrapped up in Jesus. In ‘Against the Heathen’ and ‘On the Incarnation’ (which is really one book in two volumes) he says that in the Fall we turned away from Jesus to find our joy in ourselves and so we’re constantly anxious of death – anxious of having our bodily pleasures ripped away from us – But if we are united to a risen Saviour who has conquered death – then Christians can mock at death as children make fun of a dead lion. In his childhood he’d seen a lot of martyrs doing just that – mocking death – despising this life – completely confident in Christ - and he was very willing to be martyred himself.

2. Steadfast

He is famous as Athanasius against the World. In season and out of season. Whether people loved him and he had lots of official backing from big names or whether he was in Exile, hiding in cemeteries and holes in the ground and hated and everyone seemed to have gone over to Arius he stuck to the truth.

When he was Exiled and stripped of everything – he didn’t take that as meaning he wasn’t called after all – he used the opportunity of exile to write his great books and letters. So actually his enemies strengthened the arguments against them – their weapons rebounded on them. Finally, after his death at the Council of Constantinople that Athanasius’ theology finally won the day.

Have we got convictions like that? When everyone is going one way, preaching a popular gospel – to go the unpopular way?

Where did he get convictions like that?

3. Saturated by the Word of God

You know like a cloth that is completely saturated with water and you squeeze it and water out. You squeeze Athanasius and Bible comes out.

He not only memorised huge amount of the Bible but he also knew really well the shape of the whole Bible and the way it all spoke of Christ. Athanasius wrote a really important Easter Letter in 369 – which is the first evidence we have of the list of 27 books of the NT that we have today.

He did believe in prophesies and visions (he knew that the great Desert Monk Anthony had experienced them) but his focus was completely on the Scriptures. He said: "*These* are fountains of salvation that they who thirst may be *satisfied* with the living words they contain. In these *alone* is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take out from these. For concerning these, the Lord put to shame the Sadducees, and said, 'You err, not knowing the Scriptures' and He reproved the Jews, saying, 'Search the Scriptures, for these are they that testify of ME'".

4. The attractions of heresy

Arianism might look clearly wrong – Jesus is not God – but it was very attractive:

- a) Used Scripture – lots of verses to back him up;
- b) Well marketed – catchy slogans and catchy songs – know how easily songs and hymns get things into your mind;
- c) Logical, sensible – father has a son – father exists before the son – trinity seems illogical – much simpler just to have one uncomplicated supreme God; incarnation seems illogical – how can God suffer and die?

Look out for that today – heresies, cults, Islam – use Scripture, use marketing and they will use logic. Very powerful – but cruelly wrong:

5. The cruelty of heresy

The big heresy Athanasius fought was Arianism – Jesus and the Spirit are less than God - but he also faced some Modalism – which taught that there is one God who exists in 3 modes – Father, Son and Spirit. You see both of those heresies today –

- Jehovah's witnesses and Mormonism are essentially Arian – and often use exactly the same Scriptures and arguments as Arius used.
- Oneness pentecostalism is essentially Modalist - T D Jakes and Tommy Temmy (*The God Chasers*) – would say God manifests in three modes. And I suspect most of us sometimes slip when we're praying between Father God, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit.

Problem with both is that you **can't really know God**. If Arius is right then Jesus doesn't really fully show us what God is like – when he loves us, when he serves, when he suffers for us – that's Jesus – it's not really God. God remains unknowable and distant from the world. And with Modalism – you still don't really know what God's like – he wears 3 masks – sometimes father, sometimes son,

sometimes holy spirit – but who is he really, behind the mask – there's this thought that behind the names is just this mysterious abstract being – all Power and no personality.

Another problem with both is that **they destroy the Trinity** – the beautiful truth that God is and has always been three persons united in love – God is a loving community, serving, glorifying, rejoicing in one another. If Arius is right then service and submission and being dependent means that you are less than the person you serve and submit to and are dependent on – so Jesus is less than Father – and wife is lesser being than her husband. (See how cruel this is?) And if modalism is right then service is something that God does sometimes but it isn't essential to his nature.

And a final problem with both is **there's no real atonement**. With Arianism you can be saved by Jesus, in Christ, given the Spirit but you're not in God. Sometimes even in evangelical churches we can have this idea that being saved is just a status you're given by a distant God. Athanasius said No – you're in the Son you're drawn into the community of the Trinity, your life is hidden in God. And with Modalism – what does it mean to be in Christ when Christ is just a mask that God can take off again?

Two great weapons of Athanasius that destroyed his opponents' arguments:

6. Start with Jesus

Jesus is the only way to know God – Jesus said: see me, you've seen the Father. If you seek to know God apart from through Jesus, the Son, you will find a different God.

So when he told the story of the Bible it was Jesus from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. We were made in his image, we rejected him, he is the one who comes to restore that image.

7. Knowing the Father

The other thing that Athanasius brilliantly did was show that that the Father and the Son are completely inextricably linked - dependent on one another. You can't be a Son without a Father and you can't be a Father without a Son. Arius and the Modalists both denied that God was eternally Father – either he became father when created the Son or he is father sometimes when he feels like manifesting himself as father. Both tend to think that God is essentially just a distant abstract being. But Athanasius showed that the great thing about God being Father from eternity is that God's very nature is to be a life-giver – he is a fountain pouring out water or a sun radiating light – you can't have an empty fountain or a dark sun – that is their nature and so with God – constantly begetting the Son, giving life to the Son – the Son constantly flowing out in life and love to the Spirit and the world and us.

Do we like Athanasius?

References and sources:

[Eusebius, Church History, Book VIII, Ch. 8-9.](#)

C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy*, SPCK, 1994, pp67-94.

Mike Reeves, *The Breeze of the Centuries: Introducing great theologians from the Apostolic Fathers to Aquinas*, IVP, 2010, pp57-80.

Athanasius' works themselves - online translation by [Philip Schaff NPNE](#) – start with *On the Incarnation*