

Module 106: Antony of Egypt

The Life and Ways of Our Holy Father Antony by Athanasius.
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**“The fabric of the soul is strengthened when
the pleasures of the body are weakened.”**

Module Introduction

Toward the end of the third century, the church had grown to be a huge presence in the Roman Empire. In places Christians were in the majority, and some were in government and other positions of power.

Maybe this was one of the reasons the monastic movement started: with so many people flocking into the church, its moral standards dropped, and some who wanted to go deeper with God began separating themselves from the rest of the church. They lived as hermits and practiced extreme self-denial. St Antony was the greatest name among these early monks, and took their ways to a new extreme. He lived in Egypt from about 250AD to about 350AD. This account, *The Life and Ways of Our Holy Father Antony* is by St Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, who lived in Egypt at the same time, and whom we will meet again as a key figure in the dispute over the deity of Christ.

Antony was hugely influential in inspiring people to take to the monastic life of seclusion, self-denial and prayer, and this biography did a great deal to spread that influence throughout the eastern and western church.

1. Antony was an Egyptian by birth. His parents were rich Christians from a good family and he was brought up in the faith. In childhood he knew nothing but his family home, and as he grew he never wanted to study or play with other boys, but only, like Jacob, to live quietly at home. [Gen. 25:27] He went to the Lord’s House with his parents, and was never idle or disobedient to them, listening to what was

read and keeping in his heart all the profitable things he heard. And though he was reared in affluence he did not demand or even take pleasure from luxurious food, but was content with what was given him.

2. When he was about eighteen or twenty, his father and mother died, leaving him alone with one little sister, and responsible for their home. Less than six months after this, going to the Lord's House as usual, he thought about how the Apostles left everything to follow the Savior, how according to Acts they sold their possessions and brought them to the Apostles for distribution to the needy, and what a great hope was laid up for them in heaven. He was still pondering over these things as he entered the church, and as it happened the Gospel was being read. He heard the Lord saying to the rich man, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give to the poor. Then come and follow me and you will have treasure in heaven." [Matt. 19:21] It was as if the passage had been read just for him. He immediately left the church, and gave the property of his forefathers to the villagers so that they would no longer trouble him and his sister. (This was 300 acres of very good land.) All other possessions he sold for a great deal of money and gave it to the poor, keeping back a little for his sister.

3. Then he went back to the church only to hear the Lord say in the Gospel, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow." At this, he could stay no longer, and went out, gave this last bit of money to the poor, and committed his sister to be brought up in a convent of known and faithful virgins. From now on, he devoted himself to discipline, training himself patiently. There were not many hermitages in Egypt then, and no monk had ventured into the distant desert; but all who were concerned for themselves practiced the discipline in solitude near their own village. Now, there was an old man in the next village who had lived the life of a hermit from his youth, and Antony imitated his piety. He began to

stay outside the village, and if he heard of a good man anywhere he went out, like the wise bee, to find him, and would not come home to his palace until he had seen him and received supplies for his journey of virtue. He decided never to return to the house of his fathers but to direct all his energy into perfecting his discipline. He worked with his hands though, having heard "anyone who is idle should not eat," [2 Thess. 3:10] spending some of his earnings on bread and giving some to the needy. He was ceaseless in prayer, knowing that one should pray in secret constantly - he had listened so carefully to what was read that he forgot nothing, retaining it all with such a memory that he needed no books.

5. But the Devil, who hates and envies what is good, could not bear to see a young man with such resolution and tried to defeat him as he had others. First of all he tried to lead him away from his discipline, reminding him in whispers about his wealth, his sister and family, the pleasures of money, glory, food and other diversions, and about the difficulty and labor of virtue. He also suggested to him the weakness of his body and the length of the time ahead. But the Enemy saw he was too weak for Antony's determination, and realizing that he was beaten by his firmness, his great faith and his constant prayers, he turned finally to the weapons of the flesh. He disturbed the young man by night and day, so much that the struggle was visible to onlookers. He would suggest foul thoughts, which Antony countered them with prayers, and fire him with lust, against which Antony fortified his body with faith, prayers, and fasting.... This was a source of shame to his foe, for he who believed himself like God was being mocked by a young man, and he who boasted against flesh and blood was being put to flight by a man in the flesh. The Lord was working with Antony - the Lord who for our sake took flesh and gave the body victory over the Devil, so that all who truly fight can say, "It was not I but the grace of God which was with me."

7. This was Antony's first struggle against the Devil - or rather it was the victory in Antony of the Savior "who condemned sin in the flesh that the commands of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the spirit." But although the evil one had fallen, Antony did not relax, and neither did the conquered enemy give up his attacks. Still he prowled round like a lion looking for his chance. Antony, having learned from the Scriptures that the Devil has many tricks up his sleeve, zealously continued the discipline. He knew that though the Devil had failed to deceive his heart by bodily pleasure, he would try to trap him by other means, for the demon loves sin. So he repressed his body all the more and kept it in subjection, unwilling that having conquered on one side he should be dragged down on the other. He took to a severer way of life. Many people marveled at this, but he himself used to endure the labor easily because of the eagerness of his soul. He often went through the whole night without sleep. He ate once a day, after sunset, sometimes once in two days, and often even once in four. His food was bread and salt, his drink water. There is no point even mentioning meat or wine, as even the other earnest men had nothing to do with them. He had a rush mat to sleep on, but usually he lay on the bare ground. He would not anoint himself with oil, saying young men should be earnest in training and instead of trying to stimulate the body they should accustom it to hard work, remembering the Apostle's words: "when I am weak, then am I strong." [2 Cor. 12:10] "The fabric of the soul is strengthened when the pleasures of the body are weakened," he explained....

8. Now that he was tightening his hold on himself, Antony went to the tombs which were quite a way from the village. He had one of his acquaintances shut him up alone in one of the tombs and bring him bread at intervals of many days. The enemy could not bear it and was afraid that Antony would soon fill the desert with this discipline. He came one night with a multitude of demons, and cut him up so badly

that he lay on the ground speechless from the pain. The torture was greater, he said, than anything that human blows could inflict. But the Lord never overlooks those that hope in him, and by his providence the next day his friend came bringing the loaves. He opened the door, saw him lying on the ground as though dead, and carried him to the church in the village. Many of his relatives and the villagers sat around Antony as if he were dead. But about midnight he revived and got up. Seeing them all asleep and his comrade watching alone, he beckoned him over, and asked him to carry him back to the tombs without waking anybody.

9. So the man carried him back, and again shut him up alone in the tombs. He could not stand up on account of the blows, but he prayed lying down. When he had finished praying, he shouted, "Here I am, Antony! I will not flee from your lashes. Even if you inflict more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ." And then he sang,

Though a camp be set against me, My heart shall not be afraid.

The Enemy was astonished that he dared to return after his beating. He cried to his hounds, "Since we have failed to overcome this man with the spirit of lust and with physical blows, let's find another way to attack him." Changing shape is easy for the Devil, so in the night they made such a din it seemed like an earthquake, and the demons seemed to enter in, breaking through the four walls coming in the form of animals. Suddenly the place was filled with lions, bears, leopards, bulls, snakes, scorpions, and wolves. The lion roared, the bull tossed its horns, the serpent writhed, and the wolf seemed to rush on - though none of them actually came near him. Altogether, the noise was terrifying. Antony's pains became worse than ever, but he lay watching with unshaken soul. He groaned from physical anguish, but his mind was clear, and he mocked them: "If you had any power, just one of you would have been enough. Obviously

the Lord has made you weak, so you have to try and terrify me by numbers. If you have the power, don't hold back, attack me. If you can't, why bother troubling me? Faith in our Lord is a wall of safety for us."

10. The Lord did not forget Antony's wrestling, but was at hand to help him. As Antony looked up, the roof seemed to open and a beam of light descended on him. The demons suddenly vanished, the pain of his body instantly ceased, and the building was whole again. But when Antony felt this help, and caught his breath again, he asked the vision, "Where were you? Why did you not come at the beginning to make my pain stop?" And a voice said to him, "Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight. And because you have endured and not been defeated, I will always be help you, and will make your name known everywhere." On hearing this, Antony got up and prayed, and received such strength that he realized he had more power in his body than he had before. He was then about thirty-five years old. [Antony goes further out into the desert and lives in a desert mountain fort.]

14. For nearly twenty years he continued training himself in solitude, never going out, and rarely seen by anyone. Finally, because so many people wanted to imitate his discipline, his acquaintances came out to the fort and started breaking down the door. Antony came out, as if from a temple, initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. This was the first time they had seen him outside the fort, and they were amazed at the sight. His bodily appearance as exactly like before - neither fat from lack of exercise, nor thin from fasting and struggling with the demons. Similarly, his soul was unharmed, neither contracted by grief nor relaxed by pleasure, neither laughing nor dejected, and he was neither troubled by the crowd, nor overjoyed at their greetings. Instead he was simply guided by reason, being in a state of nature. Through him the Lord healed many of those present from their diseases, and

cleansed others from evil spirits. He gave grace to Antony's speech: he comforted the sad, reunited those who were in disagreement, and called on them all to love of Christ above the whole world. He continually preached to them, telling them to remember the good things to come and the love of God, "Who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all." This way he persuaded many people to take to the solitary life. And so cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was colonized by monks who left their own people and enrolled as citizens of the heavens.

Discussion Starters:

1. What made Antony sell all he had and become a hermit? Do you think this is the ideal that all Christians should aim at? Or was he misguided, or is it a matter of personal conscience, or what?
2. Was his treatment of his sister inconsiderate or was it justified by his calling?
3. "He devoted himself to discipline." What is "discipline" in this context? How did Antony develop it, and what other ways might Christians grow in discipline?
4. The Devil plays rather a prominent role in this story. Do you find this believable? If not, how would you explain the story?
5. "The fabric of the soul is strengthened when the pleasures of the body are weakened." Do you think that the pleasures of the world are a gift from God or a distraction from the spiritual life? Can they be both?
6. How did Antony overcome his temptations? Is this a model we can follow?
7. What reason did God give for not helping Antony earlier? Is there a lesson here we can take comfort from?

8. Why do you think Antony's way of life became such an incredibly popular one for Christians in the early church? What can we learn from it today?

9. Some hermits prayed for the redemption of society, but many seemed more concerned with their personal salvation. What part should the salvation of others have in our spiritual life?

10. Protestants have traditionally taught that we can serve God in whatever station we are placed. What might Antony answer to that?

11. What does the New Testament say about fasts and punishing the body in order to attain holiness? Did Antony's life conform to New Testament teaching? See especially *Colossians 2*.

12. Can we fulfill biblical commands to love, encourage, and build one another up if we isolate ourselves?

13. Do you think some monks and hermits saw their practices as securing salvation for themselves? Can we ever give up enough to earn entrance into heaven?

Bible Verses

1 Corinthians 7:1-14, 29-35

Mark 10:17-31

Matthew 5:29-30

Judges 13:2-7

Genesis 9:1-3

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9