



BOOK CLUB

Introduction and Reading Schedule

The Life of Antony

By Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria from A.D. 328-373

Renovaré Book Club exploration facilitated by Chris Hall

INTRODUCTION:

Toward the latter stages of the third century A.D. a young man named Antony found himself sitting in church listening to the Gospel reading from Matthew 19:21 (RSV): “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria and Antony’s biographer, comments that Antony sensed Jesus’ words in Matthew’s text were directly and personally addressed to him. “It was as if by God’s design he held the saints in his recollection, and as if the passage were read on his account.” Antony immediately decided that he must respond to Jesus’ command through a concrete act of obedience. Step by step, almost methodically, Antony initiated his move into the learning space of the desert to lead a life characterized by solitude, conflict with the demonic realm, prayer, and service.

Why would Antony respond to Jesus’ teaching in such a radical fashion? Perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves is “why not?” What was he thinking? Was Antony hearing truths in the gospel to which other Christians of his day and our own are tone-deaf? Is such far-reaching, radical discipleship what Jesus meant by his commandment to the rich young ruler to give away all his possessions (Mark 10:17-25)? How are we to understand – especially those of us who live lives of material prosperity and security – Antony and the many other early Christians who made the desert a home for

most of their lives? What did they feel they could only learn in such a harsh, demanding environment?

Some have argued the desert provided the early monks with the solitude and silence they needed to come to genuine self-awareness and genuine love for God and neighbor. How so? The desert, with its lack of distractions, silence, and solitude, quickly raised to the surface important issues that demanded attention; the desert monks could no longer distance themselves from God by means of money, possessions, relationships, entertainment, and so on. Surely there is an immediacy, dedication and seriousness in these early Christians' obedience to the Gospel that is worth our close examination.

Other Christians in the church's history have been deeply affected, encouraged, challenged, and sometimes puzzled by the example of Antony. Augustine, the great North African church father, mentions the story of Antony as a key factor in his own conversion. "For I had heard the story of Antony, and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel to himself when he heard the words *Go home and sell all that belongs to you. Give to the poor, and so the treasure you shall have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me.* By this divine pronouncement he had at once been converted to you."

Why did such a seemingly eccentric and outlandish type of discipleship touch people like Augustine so profoundly? This is a question – among many others – that we will be exploring together in the weeks to come.

As you read Athanasius' biography of Antony, ponder what Athanasius might have in mind as he presents Antony's life in less than one hundred pages. Some, for instance, think Athanasius' portrait of Antony is purposely designed to show the reader what can happen in the Christian's life when radical commitment and obedience open the door for the full manifestation of the indwelling Christ.

Also try to keep track of the various themes running through the book. Remember that *The Life of Antony* is soaked in the Scripture. Athanasius knows his Bible and expects that his reader does too! **I would suggest listing every reference from the Bible in the side columns of the text.**

Here's an overall outline of the biography. I'll also provide more detailed outlines for each week we spend together with Athanasius and Antony. I list both sections and page numbers, i.e., 2.31 would mean section 2, p. 31.

Outline - The Life of Antony

1. Antony responds to the call of Christ as he hears Matt. 19:21 read in church. He is between 18 and 20 years old (2.31).
2. Important thoughts on the discipline of the desert and the development of love in Christ's disciple (3.31-4.33).
3. Temptation begins (5.33-6.35).
4. Take a careful look at Antony's character and the disciplines he practices in 7.35-7.37.
5. The next step toward the desert: Antony moves some distance from the village and begins to live in a tomb (8.37-10:39). Why would he choose to live in such a place? Note the time at the end of 10.39—15 years have passed!
6. Antony begins to make his way to the "mountain" and takes up residence in a "deserted fortress" (11.39-13.41). We have another time note at 14.42. How old would Antony be? Antony now begins a more public ministry.
7. Pay careful attention to the extended discourse from 16.43-44.64. Here we find the heart of the text as Antony teaches other apprentices of Christ.
8. Antony and the persecution of Maximin (46.65-66).
9. The request of Martinianus (48.67).
10. Antony moves south to the "inner mountain" (49.67-53.71). He is now an old man. Antony continues to teach, heal, and battle the

demons (55.72-88.94). What are the key theological points Athanasius is making? Key events that are occurring?

11. Take a good look at the narration of Antony's death (89.95-93.99).

Since the life of Antony is relatively short and we'll be reading and discussing it over a period of seven weeks, I suggest reading it more than one time. Keep track of events and teachings you find helpful and insightful. What do you find puzzling or disturbing? Some readers, for example, find Athanasius' demonology to be confusing, troubling, and frightening. Write down your questions as you move through the work, but don't let them bog you down. We'll have lots of time for discussion.

READING SCHEDULE:

- **April 25-April 30:** Read Athanasius' Introduction and sections 1-7; pp. 29-37.
- **May 2-May 7:** Read sections 8-13; pp. 37-42.
- **May 9-May 14:** Read sections 14-28; pp. 42-53.
- **May 16-May 21:** Read sections 29-43; pp. 53-64.
- **May 23-May 28:** Read sections 44-56; pp. 64-73.
- **May 30-June 4:** Read sections 57-72; pp. 74-84.
- **June 6-June 11:** Read sections 73-94; pp. 84-99.

Outlines, discussion questions, and supplementary materials will be provided on a weekly basis.