

## 21. ATHANASIUS AND THE ARIAN CONFLICT

There are two ways a house can collapse. When a violent windstorm or cyclone howls over the land, city or village, then that can change beautiful, sturdy buildings into heaps of ruins in a moment. That ruin happens through the enormous power of the wind.

But it can also happen that the beams on which the roof rests decay, and then suddenly, with a great thunderous noise, the house caves in. This example is only a picture of something I want to explain.

We often compare God's church to a building. The devil constantly tried to destroy the Church of God and wipe it off the face of the earth through the storms of persecution. At times it seemed like those storms would cause Christianity to creak, cave in, and disappear. But no, God watched, and the attempts of the prince of darkness failed.

Very well, then the devil will try something else. God's church must be destroyed from the *inside* if it fails from the *outside*! Satan will sow hatred and envy among the Christians, and with God's permission, much can happen.

Abominable heresies develop, which divide the Christians. These false doctrines obscure the pure gospel. Satan wants to destroy the pillars on which the church of God rests, and if he succeeds, the building will collapse. The devil has already tried that many times and is still trying. We have already learnt about Gnosticism, Marcion, and Montanism. Remember? Well, the devil tries that again. After the death of Julian the Apostate, it



seemed the church would have a period of rest.

But it only *seemed* that way because the church of God will *never* obtain "rest" on earth. Here we must fight the good fight of faith until the last day. Those new errors did not begin after the death of Julian; oh no, by then, the *internal* battle was already in full swing. How come? Just listen!

### THE CONFLICT BEGINS

In 318 A. D. (going back some years in history), a severe quarrel erupted among the Christians in Alexandria, a large city in Egypt. At the time, things were not going too well in Alexandria. People who had been good friends for years now behaved like enemies, passing each other on the streets without greeting. They threw nasty, hostile looks at each other. Then their eyes flashed angrily. As they travel to and from church and home, the arguments continued in heated debates. They flung the most bitter reproaches at each other. One cried out:

"And I tell you, Arius is right! Of course he is! You are too stupid to understand that!"

The other man answers sharply:

"No way, man, you don't know what you're talking about! Alexander is right. Arius is a heretic and a false teacher." Flushed with anger, the first one cried: "Oh, is Arius a heretic! How *dare* you say that! I won't put up with such nonsense anymore!"

See those men standing there, opposing each other furiously. Their faces are red with anger, their fists clenched. Finally, they walk away angrily. Scenes like that are everywhere. Cursing, fuming, scornful laughter and mocking were the order of the day. Hatred and envy were everywhere. But what does it all mean?

What are those people arguing about? Who is Arius? And who is Alexander?

Alexander is the bishop or minister at Alexandria. Arius was first a deacon under Alexander. Later he was chosen as an elder.





Arius 250 or 256–336.  
Wikipedia

Then a severe quarrel started between Alexander and Arius. Arius declared that the Lord Jesus was not God. According to Arius, the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, was *not* from eternity. God had created the Lord Jesus just like the angels, people, and the world. Arius

said:

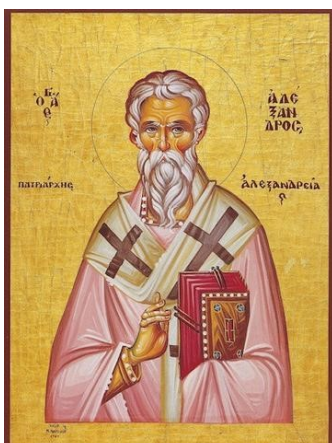
"True, the Lord Jesus is indeed the first Creature; God created the Lord Jesus before the world, but from eternity? No, the Lord Jesus is not from eternity."

Bishop Alexander opposed that abominable heresy. He said:

"No, Arius, you are wrong. The Lord Jesus *is* God. The Lord Jesus *is* from eternity".

But that quarrel did not stay between Arius and Alexander. Sadly, this controversy split the church in Alexandria into two groups. One group believed that Arius was right, and the other thought Alexander was right! Soon, hatred, envy, discord, and division dominated the Church in Alexandria.

But Arius *was* wrong. What Arius taught was abominable and God-dishonouring. If Arius was right, nobody could be saved because then the Lord Jesus could not be the Saviour. Our Saviour must be God *and* man. That was the only way He could satisfy God's justice by His suffering and dying. That was the only way He could pay for sin and obtain



Bishop Alexander. It's not known when he was born. He died in 326 or 328. Wikipedia

salvation for His people. That could never happen if the Lord Jesus were only a *creature* of God. No, Arius, the Lord Jesus truly *is* God!

That's what all the conflict in the church at Alexandria was about. And it did not stay confined to the church at Alexandria but spread throughout the entire church in the east! It caused massive disturbances, confusion and unrest. Many bishops sided with Arius. It seemed as if the church of God would tear itself apart. Will the devil be victorious?

### EMPEROR CONSTANTINE INTERVENES

One day, a messenger from the emperor arrives at Alexandria. Arius and Alexander must come to him, and that messenger tells them in the emperor's name that they must stop quarrelling. They must reconcile. The emperor, Constantine the Great, wants peace in his realm — harmony in every area—peace among the nations and the church. The emperor imagines it is a common quarrel, so he commands Arius and Alexander to stop arguing.



Constantine the Great. 272-337

But when the imperial messenger has talked with Alexander and Arius, he shakes his head doubtfully. He senses that this is no common quarrel about unimportant trifles; no, this is about matters of faith. He returns to the emperor and says:

"Sire, this is no common quarrel these men may easily settle. The matter in question is a deep faith issue."

The emperor considers this matter seriously. Then he says:

"Okay, then, all the bishops must come together. I will call a *council*."

Now we would say 'a synod'.

### THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

In the year 325, the assembly of bishops met in the little city of Nicea, Asia Minor, close to Constantinople. At that council of Nicea, about

318 bishops were present. They talked for days on end. But no peace came.

The emperor came, too. He enters the hall dressed in a beautiful purple robe and a crown sparkling with precious gems on his head. All the bishops rise from their seats. The emperor makes a speech in which he urges that they must reconcile.

Bishop Alexander has a young deacon with him. His name is *Athanasius*.

This young man contends fiercely with Arius. Athanasius is a God-fearing deacon. He maintains that the Lord Jesus is from eternity, and therefore He is God. When he speaks, all the bishops listen attentively.

See him standing there. Indignantly, he contends with Arius. He proves that the Lord Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father from God's Word. He openly says that Arius is a wicked heretic.

Finally, the council of Nicea concludes that Athanasius is right. They write a declaration confirming that the Lord Jesus truly is God from eternity. All bishops must sign that declaration. Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, signs it willingly. But Arius says:

"No, I will not put my name to that document. I'm *not* doing it!"

The emperor commands him to sign that declaration; if Arius refuses stubbornly, he will be banished. That means that he must leave Alexandria. Naturally, he cannot continue as an elder. The emperor sends him to a tiny town on the empire's border. They must burn the books that Arius has written.

Emperor Constantine issues a law that no one may read Arius' books anymore. No one may sell or distribute them, and whoever still does shall be put to death.

The emperor thinks:  
"There, now rest and peace return to my realm; now there will be peace in the church."

All the bishops go home. Alexander and his intelligent deacon, Athanasius, also return to Alexandria. Three years later, Alexander died, and it was no surprise that the God-fearing Athanasius became bishop in his place.

Emperor Constantine had imagined that the council would end the ecclesiastical struggle. But he was wrong!

The conflict was *not* over because Arius still had many followers who continued to uphold him in



Council of Nicea in 325. History.co.uk

his error, both in Alexandria and other places. From his place of banishment, Arius wrote letters to them, urging them to persevere. And so the conflict secretly continued, undercover. Arius and his friends continued to fight against the Nicean council's decisions. The devil does not easily and quickly give up the fight! The consequences soon became apparent because ...

## GOD INTERVENES

One of the many tributaries of the Rhine River is the Moselle River. It flows close to the border of the Roman Empire. Along that small river lies the city of Trier. But in the days of Constantine the Great, Trier was not a city yet. It consisted of only a few houses for the soldiers who had to guard the border, a tiny village.

A man is wandering around aimlessly between those few houses. He is looking despondent. With a shake of his head, he slowly walks around that lonely and desolate place. At times he heaves a big sigh and folds his hands in prayer.

That man is Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria! You may think: "What? Trier in Germany is a long way from Alexandria in Egypt! How did that happen?"

How come Athanasius is wandering around so aimlessly out *there*? Athanasius, the God-fearing bishop of Alexandria, was banished by emperor Constantine the Great. How come?

Well, that is a sad story. Constantine the Great, who took the side of Athanasius and banished Arius at the famous Council of Nicea, has changed his mind completely!

His sister, a follower of Arius, constantly stirred up her brother and would not stop putting Athanasius in an unfavourable light. She made her brother believe that he had acted wrongly in the case of Arius.

At first, Constantine would not listen to her, but she kept nagging till the emperor recalled Arius from his place of banishment and banished Athanasius to distant Trier. I won't go into all the

details, but it ended in Athanasius wandering around in solitary exile in faraway Trier. The devil has great power! With God's permission, much may happen.

And while the faithful Athanasius sighs in exile, Arius returns victoriously from banishment and will be publicly reinstated in his honour and office. That ceremony will take place on a Sunday in Constantinople. On Saturday, the day before his restoration, Arius walks proudly through the streets of that beautiful city. He wears a happy expression, and his eyes sparkle with joy. He has finally conquered! Tomorrow, tomorrow it will happen!

His humiliation has finally ended! A victorious smile curls about his lips. But suddenly, he writhes in pain. A deadly pallor covers his face as he grimaces and twists in unbearable pain. Moaning, he stumbles on, and before the day is over, Arius is dead.

That was a clear act of God! They *could* not publicly reinstate Arius the following day, for his lifeless body was awaiting burial!

God showed His wrath and disfavour by removing Arius and summoning this heretic before His fearsome tribunal. Would Arius also have gained the victory there?

Yet the struggle was still not over because Arius' followers, the *Arians*, continued to fight.

Emperor Constantine the Great also died shortly after Arius' sudden death. His successor recalled Athanasius, and soon the faithful servant of the Lord was preaching again in 'his' church at Alexandria.

Athanasius stood at the forefront of the struggle against the Arians for forty-six years. Sometimes Athanasius was declared right, then he was banished again, and the Arians triumphed. One emperor would be a friend of Athanasius, while his successor was an Arian. They exiled Athanasius five times between successive emperors and called him back five times. Altogether Athanasius spent twenty years in exile.



*The Council of Constantinople in 381*

Once, imperial soldiers forced their way into the church where he was preaching. He had a narrow escape by sneaking out through the back door. He wandered through the wilderness for several years until another emperor called him back. And so it continued. He was alternately honoured, despised, mocked, and driven away like an evildoer.

No, Athanasius did not have a peaceful and easy life. He continued to fight tirelessly and sacrificed his life in the service of the Lord. But he did not give in or yield one inch because it concerned the Lord's honour.

### **EMPEROR JULIAN THE APOSTATE'S WICKED PLAN FAILS**

In the previous chapter, I told you about Julian the Apostate. As we know, this emperor was a bitter enemy of the Christians. When Julian came to power, Athanasius was in exile. Do you know what Julian did?

He immediately recalled Athanasius!

What?!

Was Julian the Apostate a friend of the godly Athanasius?

Oh, no, quite the opposite; he hated that faithful preacher! So why did he recall him? He had a reason for that. Pay close attention.

Julian hated Christianity and tried to destroy the church of God. Conflict, division, hatred and envy were rife in God's church. Julian thought: "Great! I'll encourage those despicable Christians to quarrel among themselves. The more, the better! If those Christians want to destroy *themselves*, I won't need to. Let them do it themselves!" And so he recalled Athanasius. He hoped that would cause an increase in the fierceness of the struggle and make Christianity disappear sooner rather than later.

One of the most dangerous weapons of the prince of darkness is always to start quarrels, divisions, and confusion among God's people. The devil has done this throughout history and continues to do so. But woe to those who allow themselves to be the devil's instrument for that purpose! However, God watched over His church, and the crafty, devilish design of Julian the Apostate failed. When the wicked emperor saw that things weren't going his way, he exiled Athanasius again.

Finally, in 373, Athanasius died at the age of 75. Then the Lord relieved him from his task, and he entered eternal glory.

Athanasius was a father to God's church; we still call him one of the church fathers. He was worthy of that title because God gives that grace and glory.

Athanasius' labour has borne rich fruits.

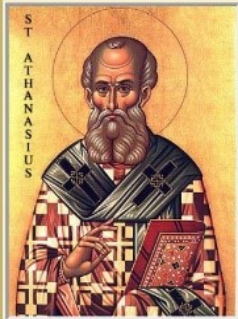
In 381, eight years after the death of Athanasius, another council (synod) met in Constantinople, and that assembly condemned the Arian doctrine permanently. At that council, the church drew up a confession of faith, and out of respect for Athanasius, they called that confession 'The Athanasian Creed'. You can find it at the back of every good psalm book.

The separation between the west and the east became clear in those troubling times. The west, with Rome as the centre, strongly supported Athanasius, but the church in the east, with Constantinople as the centre, chose the side of Arius.

Many bishops in the east continued to preach the doctrine of Arius.

Later, the church split in two. Arianism remained in the east, but thankfully, Arianism disappeared from the west.

The Creed of St. Athanasius  
Feast Day: May 2nd



**Who**soever will be saved, before all things it is necessary, that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which faith, except everyone do keep entire and inviolate, without doubt he will perish everlastingly.

**N**ow the Catholic Faith is this; that we worship One God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the substance.

**F**or there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all One; the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

**S**uch as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also they are not three uncreates, nor three incomprehensibles; but one uncreate, and one incomprehensible. In like manner the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty. And yet not three almighties, but one almighty.

**S**o the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Ghost God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Ghost is Lord. And yet they are not three Lords, but one Lord. For like as we are

*Part of The Athanasian Creed. Most likely written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Although called the Athanasian Creed, it was not written by him. Author is unknown*  
<https://anastpaul.com/>

## QUESTIONS

1. What does the author mean by 'attempting to destroy the church from the inside?' How is this done?
2. How does the sowing of hatred and envy affect the doctrinal purity of the church?
3. What difference of opinion developed in Alexandria between Alexander and Arius? What position did each of these men hold in the church?
4. Why does the author state that no one can be saved if Arius' view were correct? Explain.
5. Did the errors remain in the vicinity of Alexandria? Explain.
6. What was Constantine's conclusion after learning that the quarrel involved deep matters of faith?
7. What is a council? Who attended it?
8. Where is Nicea?
9. Who is Athanasius? Which side did he take?
10. What did God enable Athanasius to do?
11. What conclusion did the council reach? What did it do?
12. What were the bishops instructed to do? How did Arius react?
13. What punishment did Arius receive?
14. Why was Athanasius banished to Trier?
15. How did God protect His church at this critical moment?
16. Summarise the rest of the life of Athanasius.
17. What was Julian's purpose in restoring Athanasius?
18. Give the background of the Athanasian Creed.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Which type of storm is most dangerous for a church, one from without or one from within? Explain.
2. How does the church today deal with error or heresy?
3. Study the Athanasian Creed. What are its main principles? Why does it repeat the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit so often?
4. How do we see the Arian error in churches today?