

29. HERMITS AND MONKS (THIRD CENTURY)

When it gets dark, we turn on the light so we can see.

But suppose a man lights a candle in a dark room, and after putting it on the floor, he covers it with a bucket. Although the light shines, the man gets no benefit from it because the bucket covers it. Wouldn't we consider that silly? Of course, because then the room becomes dark again.

When we light a candle, we place it on a candlestick, preferably as high as possible so that the light can shine into the room's furthest corners.

Through sin, darkness has come into the world. I don't mean the usual darkness that comes when the sun sets, and it becomes night, but the blackness in the hearts of men. Through sin, all men are subject to threefold death.



*Old woman reading the Bible by candlelight.
Painting by Rembrandt van Rijn*

Through sin, we have become haters of God and our neighbours. We no longer know God as Adam and Eve knew the Lord. We sin in thoughts, words, and deeds. Sin darkens our minds. Through this terrible evil, darkness has come into the world.

This black wickedness affects the whole human race.

But thankfully, the light of God's grace still shines in the darkness of this world. Dead sinners are made alive by the light of God's Word and Spirit. By grace, God reconciles His enemies to Himself. This grace gives God's people on earth a task, a calling. They must witness to all those foolish unbelievers who are lost in sin and guilt that it is possible to be saved.

The Lord says: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works..." (Matt. 5: 16). God's people must be 'the light' of the world. They must proclaim the gospel to the blind pagans. They must declare that Jesus Christ came into the world to save lost sinners.

HOW IT BEGAN

Everyone hates sorrow and misery. When we get into trouble, we try to solve that as soon as possible. When dangers threaten us, we try to escape those dangers. That was the same for the first Christian churches. When the persecutions raged, and no one was sure of their lives from one moment to the next, many Christians fled. Especially in the east, it was easy to get away. They simply moved to the great, immense wilderness. They withdrew into its solitude. That's how many escaped their persecutors and saved their lives, especially during the violent persecutions under Emperor Decius, as told in chapter 16.

But when Decius died and the persecutions stopped, many returned to their homes again. I purposely said: 'many' because there were also people who did *not* go back but continued living in the solitude of the wilderness. Those people were called 'hermits.' What they did was wrong. When

the danger was past, they should have returned to society.

This 'living in solitude' is the origin of monks and monasteries. Do you know what monks and monasteries are? We still find them in the Roman Catholic Church. This chapter will tell you about a few hermits of long ago.

ANTHONY

In 251, a child was born in the Egyptian village of Coma. There was joy in the home of those parents. They called their child *Anthony*. What would become of that baby boy? No one knew but God alone.

Little Anthony did not know what poverty was because his parents were wealthy. His father owned vast estates in the vicinity of Coma. Anthony learned about Christianity as a child because his father and mother were Christians. Later, a little girl was born into that family.

Anthony did not want to learn. Sure, there were schools, and his parents could also pay for his education, but Anthony did not wish to learn to read and write. He was a quiet, withdrawn boy with an introverted nature.

He never played with other children. He did not mix with other children at all. That was why he refused to go to school. He preferred to roam the vast estates of his father all by himself. He faithfully went to Church with his parents and remembered the sermons well. He never forgot the chapter he heard read from God's Word. That is how Anthony grew up. But what happens?

When he was twenty, he lost his father and mother soon after each other. Now he was an orphan and had to care for his little sister. Happily, that wasn't a problem because he was rich.

One day, while he is sitting in Church, he hears the story of the young ruler who came to Jesus with the question:
"Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

The Lord Jesus answered:

"Go your way, sell all you have, and follow Me."
This story made a deep impression on Anthony. *He* is that rich young man! He felt as if the Lord Jesus personally gave *him* that answer. Okay, he shall do what the Lord commands him.

And so Anthony gifts his vast estates to the poor inhabitants of Coma, his birthplace. He denies himself all riches and luxuries. He sells his possessions. Anthony also gives away most of the money he makes. He only keeps a small amount for himself and his sister. From now on, they live very simple lives.

But one Sunday, he hears the minister read this text: "Be careful about nothing." This text makes him give the last of his money to the poor. He brings his sister to some God-fearing Christians. They must take further care of the upbringing of the young girl.

Then Anthony leaves his birthplace and goes into the wilderness, where he lives in solitude for fifteen years in a cave also used as a tomb. After that, he lives in the ruins of an ancient fortress for twenty years, and eventually, he travels even further into the wilderness. There, in that remote spot, he lives near a mountain. A freshwater spring near that mountain produced bubbling, delicious, cool water. Some date palms also grew there. His clothing consisted of only a sheepskin, which he had put around his shoulders. Once a day, he ate bread with a bit of salt. His only drink was the spring water. He grew the grain from which he baked bread. He often fasted for a day and sometimes four or five days in a row. He had no bed. He just slept on the hard, rocky ground without a pillow or blankets. He only pulled the sheepskin over himself.

It can be freezing at night and reach sweltering temperatures during the day in that wilderness. He never washed.
Perhaps you think:
"What an odd person!
Why did he do that?
Was all that necessary?"

Of course not. It was not necessary at all; that was not what the Lord Jesus meant when He gave that

answer to the rich young man. The Saviour only wanted to test that young man.

But Anthony thought that he could serve God better in the desolate wilderness than in the cities and villages of Egypt.

He believed he could live closer to the Lord alone than among his people. Anthony imagined that he would sin less by living in solitude. Then he would not see the sinful conduct of his people or be tempted to sin. That's how he tried to overcome sin.

But Anthony was wrong because he forgot he could not leave his sinful *heart* behind. He carried that evil heart along wherever he went. Sin does not only come to us from without, but sin lives *within* us. We have a wicked, depraved heart that, by nature, hates God and our neighbour! God's Spirit must renew that heart. Even though it is renewed and sanctified by grace, sin still dwells in our hearts. We remain sinners till our death.

True, God's people no longer desire or take pleasure in sin. They fight against the depravity of their heart and pray for strength to resist sin, but they *remain* sinners, until death delivers them from the body of sin. But Anthony was not aware of that.

We must not think that Anthony was an unconverted man or a hypocrite. Oh no, he served the Lord sincerely. But did the Lord show Anthony His grace so he could go and hide in the wilderness?

Had God made the light of His grace shine in Anthony's heart so he could bury that 'light' in the wilderness?

Of course not. On the contrary! Anthony should have let that light shine! He should have earnestly warned his fellowmen about God's coming judgment.

His calling was to tell them that they should repent. By a pious lifestyle, he should have provoked his neighbour to jealousy. He should have preached salvation to them and pointed them to Christ as the only Saviour and ground of salvation.

Though Anthony's intentions were well-meant, he was wrong. God calls us to be a light in a dark world lost in trespasses and sin. That was also Anthony's calling.

But even though Anthony did not go to the people, the people came to him. He received visitors every day! All kinds of people came to ask his advice for their problems. They often ate with him, and he offered them vegetables from his garden. But he never ate them himself.

Anthony only left the wilderness twice during his long life to go to the large city of Alexandria. The first time was in the year 310. That was during the reign of the wicked Emperor Galerius. (Chapter 17.) At the time, terrible persecution raged throughout the Roman empire, and imperial soldiers were cruelly killing tens of thousands of Christians.

But why did Anthony go to Alexandria at that particular time? During those fearsome days, hundreds of Christians fled to the wilderness to



Anthony the Hermit (Twitter)

escape that threatening danger, and he *looked* for that danger. Why did he do that?

Because Anthony sought the martyr's crown. He purposely went to Alexandria to be imprisoned and killed. That was wrong of Anthony. No one may intentionally endanger himself. Anthony was not allowed to do that either. That was tempting God!

The Lord had declared in His law: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." If it is the Lord's will that one of His children must glorify God through the martyr's death, then we must submit and accept that. Then it is about the glory of God. But to *seek* a martyr's death is never allowed, for then we do it for *our* honour.

Look, there he walks through the streets of Alexandria, barefoot, wearing nothing but a sheepskin. He loudly proclaims that he is a Christian. It is as though he says:

"Come on then, arrest and imprison me, for I am also a Christian."

And? Did they seize him? Did they cruelly kill him? No, they didn't!

The pagans looked at him with the greatest amazement. They scornfully shrugged their shoulders, pointed to their forehead, smiled at each other and quietly let him do his thing without harming him. They thought they were looking at a lunatic. No one bothered about him.

While thousands of Christians were languishing in prison and hundreds were getting killed, he walked around freely.

When the terrible persecution suddenly stopped a year later because Galerius had become incurably ill, Anthony returned to the wilderness, greatly disappointed. He had not achieved what he set out to do. He had sought death but had not found it. God still had work for him. His task on earth was not yet complete. He would leave this earth in *God's* time, not before!

Twenty years later, he suddenly appears in Alexandria again. Why this time? Had another round of persecution begun? Was he seeking the martyr's crown again? No, not this time. The

persecutions had stopped. It was when Constantine the Great ruled and had just delivered the church from persecution.

But another danger was threatening the church of the Lord.

Arius and Athanasius were having a bitter conflict in Alexandria. (See chapter 21).

Anthony learned from his visitors that Arius tried to destroy the church of God through his devilish teachings. Arius was that dangerous heretic who taught that the Lord Jesus was not God but only a creature of God. Arius attacked the essential points of the truth and caused great divisions everywhere.

Holy indignation filled Anthony's soul.

He could no longer remain in the wilderness but hurried to Alexandria. He openly defended his King, Saviour and Surety, who had also bought him with His blood. He strongly opposed Arius, that dangerous heretic. In all earnestness, he preached that the Lord Jesus is indeed God from eternity. He supported and assisted the God-fearing Athanasius in his severe struggle against



Anthony the Hermit. Encyclopedia Britannica

Arius. He earnestly warned the people of Alexandria against the destructive doctrine of Arius.

You are doing the right thing, Anthony; that's the way to go! Let the light of God's grace shine brightly! Warn your fellowmen against the satanic teachings of Arius.

The Lord richly blessed Anthony's earnest preaching. Through it, God converted many people, including pagans, and opened many eyes to the dangerous doctrine of the Arians.

During the short time Anthony preached in Alexandria, more people were converted than there had been for many years. How humiliating that reality should have been for Anthony. The Lord seemed to be directing Anthony to his calling and duty. But Anthony did not seem to understand this, and he soon returned to the wilderness again and buried the rich gifts of grace that the Lord had given him. What a pity! Anthony, you do not belong in the wilderness. Your calling is in Alexandria! But he returned to the solitude.

Finally, in the year 356, at the age of 105 years, he entered into eternal glory. Afterwards, the Roman Catholic Church canonised Anthony. (This means they declared him a saint). They appointed a particular holy day for him.

Of course, we understand that such a thing is completely wrong. Anthony was not holy in himself. He did not use the many gifts God had given him in the right way. He did not earn salvation through his solitary life.

He could only enter glory based on Christ's merits. Who had purchased him with the price of His blood? That honour does not belong to Anthony but to Christ.

THE SPREAD AND LIFESTYLE OF HERMITS

God's people must be extra careful in their conduct of life here on earth because the whole world is watching them. They must be examples to others. The wicked take note of the sins of God's people, and other Christians eagerly remember them. That's why Anthony's way of life was so dangerous, for thousands and thousands followed his example. Those followers did not flee from danger, for there was no danger. They

voluntarily went into solitude for no apparent reason. They willingly endured the greatest poverty and hardship.

Sadly, some of God's children were among them, but some tried to earn their way to heaven by doing this.

That hermit's life spread throughout Egypt. Then it spread beyond Egypt's borders. Soon thousands of hermits also lived in other countries. In Syria, Palestine, or the so-called 'Holy land,' because the Lord Jesus had lived there, in Asia Minor and Greece, they lived in all the Eastern countries. They even spread west of the Roman Empire in Italy, France, Spain, and North Africa. There were hermits everywhere.

People were trying to escape all the temptation to sin by seeking solitude. But those people forgot one crucial thing: they took their sinful hearts with them. They could not leave *that* behind! Some hermits not only lived in the greatest poverty but also tortured their bodies. When they became aware that sin lived *in* them and discovered that sin had infested their depraved hearts, they tried to *beat* it out! They whipped their bodies till they bled.



The Hermit. Painter: Gerrit Dou

Foolish people! You cannot beat sin out of your heart. Only the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. Not the whip, but only God's grace can deliver us from eternal death; no salvation through merit, but out of free grace. Many torturing methods of the hermits were too foolish to mention. Some had adopted the habit of not sleeping lying down but sitting.

There was one who walked for hours on his bare feet through the burning sands of the desert. His throat was dry and hot; his tongue swelled from the unbearable thirst; his feet were swollen and full of blisters from the sun's heat. But he refused to drink anything. He imagined that by doing this, God would be gracious to him. The Lord would take pity on him.

Another hermit from Syria was reading the Bible while walking. He came past a field where a few farmers were ploughing. He stopped for a moment to watch them. By doing so, he forgot to read his Bible. According to him, that was terrible! So what did he do? He had an iron ring welded around his neck. Then he had an iron ring welded around each leg. After that, he had a chain fastened to those rings. He fixed one end of that chain to the ring welded around his neck, and the other he attached to the rings around his legs. He purposely kept that chain too short so that it pulled him crooked. Because of that, he forced himself to always walk with his head bent down. Now he could no longer look up and stop to watch a few ploughing farmers. He walked, ate, and slept in that bent-over position. Not just for some years but for the rest of his life! How foolish!

What unnecessary torture! Did Christ sacrifice His precious blood for *that*? Did He die that bitter and painful death on the cross for *that*?

Through these unnecessary tortures, this hermit tried to make himself acceptable in the sight of God. He wanted to bear some of the punishment for sin. In doing so, he tried to endure God's wrath against sin. He misunderstood and underestimated the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus as if Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient. That way, he denied the only Saviour.

I could keep going for a long time. If I had to tell you all that foolishness, I would never finish, for, in a short time, there were more than 50,000 hermits or monks. They all tried to outdo each other by inventing the worst tortures.

Just remember one thing well: the hermits based this whole hermit or monastic movement on an enormous error. *They thought they had to earn their own salvation.* Again, we see they believed the lie.

SIMON THE PILLAR SAINT

Before I close this chapter, I want to tell you about one more monk. This hermit invented something entirely different. He was more foolish than the others.

The large city of Antioch is on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, north of Canaan. Around 430 A.D., a stone pillar stood near that city. This pillar was about 12 feet high. (About four meters) On top of that pillar, someone had built a floor of about two yards (approx 2 meters) by two yards. A man named Simon lived on that tiny space for years, right in the open. He never left that pillar. He lived on that stone pillar day and night in storms, rain, cold, and heat. Why did he do that? Well, that's how he wanted to escape the temptations of sin. He lived on that pillar of about twelve feet high for seven years.



Pillar saint. www.lookandlearn

After those seven years, he moved to another, even higher pillar. According to some writers, he shifted posts more than once. Finally, he had one built sixty feet tall, a tower's height. Unbelievably, he lived on that pillar for thirty long years without ever coming down. What utter foolishness!

Foolishness? No way, not according to the people of Antioch! They honoured that man. From far and wide, visitors streamed in to see and hear that 'holy' man! But anyone who came in the morning had to wait for hours because he spent the entire morning praying. In the afternoon, he addressed the large multitude who had come to hear him. When it finally got dark, his visitors went home. He remained behind, lonely and deserted on that high pillar. Friends brought him food every day. Then Simon let down a basket tied to a long rope. They put his food in that. He kept doing that for thirty long, long years.

We would say: "How is it possible! How could he keep it up for such a long time?" Most people spoke about that eccentric man with the most profound respect. Because Simon lived so high, they thought he was much closer to God than the people on the ground. Such a man must surely be a 'holy man.' What else could it be?

Thankfully, other people thought differently. One wrote him a note which said: "Whoever shall exalt himself shall be abased," and "If any does not work, neither should he eat." But those warnings did not help. Simon *was* on that pillar, and he *stayed* on that pillar! What a useless and aimless life and then so long!



Simon the Pillar Saint, 60 feet high. Catholic Ireland.net

In those days, people admired such foolish and senseless things. Finally, Simon died at a great age.

Some say he lived over fifty years on top of those various pillars. After his death, the foolish church leaders canonised him. His bones were dug up and handled with immense respect. They preserved his bones as relics in various churches and committed idolatry with them.

Of course, others followed his silly example. Especially in eastern countries, many people raised a pillar on which to live. 'Pillar saints' popped up everywhere! But not one pillar saint kept it up as long as Simon. Some people in the west also wanted to imitate that foolishness, but thankfully, it was forbidden. The authorities compelled them to come down and then demolished their pillars. That was good!

THE BEGINNING OF MONASTERIES

There were thousands and thousands of hermits. At times they lived together in groups. A stone wall surrounded the huts in which they lived. Such a collection of hermit huts was called a monastery. The occupants of those monasteries were called monks.

In the west, the church built large stone buildings for the monks to live in, with stone walls around them. The leader of such a group of monks was called an *abbot*. That word means 'father.' To enter a monastery, men had to take the 'monastic vow.' Then they solemnly promised never to leave the monastery and always live in poverty and chastity. They had to subject themselves to the rules of that monastery.

Women's monasteries, or convents, soon followed this development. These female monks are called *nuns*.

You have undoubtedly seen a few nuns (also called sisters), for those monasteries and convents are in every country. They still exist in the Roman Catholic Church.

To start with, those monks worked hard and made themselves useful. Some copied the Bible or other good books, for the art of printing did not exist



New Norcia is the only monastic town in Western Australia, with its Benedictine abbey founded in 1848 by two Spanish Benedictine monks, Fathers Salvado and Serra. They later founded a mission and schools for Aboriginal children.

A series of Catholic colleges were created, with the school that became St Benedict's College in 1965

New Norcia is located on the Moore River about 100 kilometres north-east of Perth.

then yet. Others worked in the fields from dawn till dusk. The monks' hard work changed the desolate wasteland into fertile pastures and fields. Other monks became teachers, and many children went to convent schools, where they learned reading, writing and arithmetic. Some monks studied medical science and became clever doctors. They helped and visited the sick and frail for miles around.

And finally, some monks went to preach the gospel to the faraway pagans, often endangering their lives. They became missionaries. Later, we shall hear much more about them. Those cloisters were a blessing for hundreds of years for the country and its people. Their primary purpose was



'Some copied the Bible...Irish Monk. Epic World history

to escape sin and separate themselves from other people. Yet that cloistered life was not good because the basis was wrong. God's word does not tell us to do that anywhere.

On the contrary, it is in direct contradiction with the Holy Scriptures. The Lord Jesus has prayed: "Father, I pray not that You should *take them out of the world* but that You should *keep them from evil*. "

God calls His people to live *in* the world. They must let the light of God's grace shine so that others will see their works and repent.

Since the basis was not sound, it could not continue to go well.

We shall discover that those same cloisters later became pools of sin and iniquity, just like Sodom and Gomorrah.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is meant by a 'threefold death'?
2. Explain the text, 'Let your light so shine before men'.
3. What is a hermit?
4. What caused early Christians to become hermits?
5. Identify Anthony.

6. Read the story of Anthony carefully. What error did he make concerning the answer of Jesus to the question of the rich, young ruler?
7. What error did Anthony make concerning sin?
8. How did he fail in his responsibility to care for his sister?
9. Did Anthony 'let his light shine'? Explain your answer.
10. Why did Anthony go to Alexandria? Why was this wrong?
11. How and why did God frustrate Anthony's intention?
12. Why did Anthony make a second trip to Alexandria?
13. What error did Arius teach?
14. How did God bless Anthony's work in Alexandria?
15. How did Anthony conceal the rich gifts of grace God bestowed on him?
16. What is meant by 'canonising' Anthony?
17. Why are holy days wrong?
18. What effect did Anthony's behaviour have on others?
19. List one reason why an unconverted person might become a hermit.
20. Why did some of the hermits whip their bodies?
21. Why is this practice wrong?
22. List three methods of self-torture used by the hermits.

23. What did such self-tormentors hope to achieve by their tortures?
24. Why was this such a serious error?
25. Identify Simon.
26. What was he hoping to achieve?
27. Explain the warning some gave to Simon.
28. What is a monastery? A monk? An abbot?
29. What is a monastic vow? What does it include?
30. What is a convent? A nun?
31. Give five examples of valuable labour performed by the early monks.
32. How was cloister life contradicting God's Word, which states: 'Father, I pray not that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from evil'?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. May a faithful Christian be rich? Find two examples of children of God in the Bible who possessed considerable wealth.
2. How must a true Christian use his wealth?
3. Quote one Bible text to support your answer to the last question.
4. Find one Biblical example of a child of God who rejected his calling by running from his responsibility.
5. Read 1 Corinthians 3. What does Paul say about the one true foundation? What does he say about other foundations?



Kylemore Abbey Ireland

This magnificent Kylemore castle was built in 1868.

Since 1920 it is used as a Benedictine abbey.

The abbey was founded for Benedictine Nuns who fled Belgium in World War I..