

Lives of Desert Fathers

# Paul of Thebes

*by Jerome, Presbyter*

I have finished my course; I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness. 2 Tim. 4:7

**T**HERE IS a controversy among many people about who was the first person to take to living in the desert as a hermit. Some point back as far as the blessed Elijah and John the Baptist as being among the first. Yet Elijah seems to us to have been more of a prophet than a monk, and as for John, he began to prophesy even before he was born! (Luke 1:44). Others say that Antony was the first, an opinion that is commonly held by the mass of the people, but that is only partly true. For it is not so much that he was the first, as that he was the one who did so much to encourage others to do so. Indeed, even the disciples of Antony, Amathas and Macarius, the former of whom buried Antony's body, nowadays assert that Paul of Thebes was the pioneer of this kind of life. I incline to that opinion myself, although there are many who will repeat all sorts of stories as the whim takes them, such as that Paul was only a man covered in hair right down to his feet living in a hole in the ground, and other invented tales too tedious to trouble with. Such impudent lies need to be refuted.

So then, seeing that Antony is now being diligently publicized both in Latin and Greek, I have decided to write something about the beginning and end of Paul's life, not because I have any great confidence in my own ability, but simply because so far it has not been dealt with. What happened during the greater part of his life, or what battles with Satan he endured, it is not given to any man to know.

**Chapter I.** During the persecutions of Decius and Valerian, a savage storm laid waste many of the churches of Egypt and the Thebaid. It was during this time that Cornelius at Rome and Cyprian at Carthage gloriously shed their blood. To be put to the sword for the name of Christ was held to be a true Christian sacrifice. But the enemy wanted to subdue the soul even more than the body, and they invented ingenious, lingering ways of putting people to death. As Cyprian, who suffered like that, said, 'Although they wanted to die, death was withheld from them'. I shall give you a couple of examples of this, so that the cruelty of it may be more thoroughly understood.

**Chapter II.** There was one particular martyr who persevered victoriously in the faith through tortures by racks and hot metal plates,

so they ordered him to be smeared all over with honey, and laid him out in the heat of the sun with his hands tied behind his back, hoping that even though he had survived the hot frying pan, he might succumb to the burning pain of the insect bites.

**Chapter III.** They ordered another young man in the flower of his youth to be taken into a most pleasant little garden, with white lilies and red roses, and a gentle murmuring stream winding through it, and the wind making a sweet whisper though the leaves of the trees, where they made him lie down on a feather bed, and left him there, tied down with soft silken bonds to prevent him escaping. [They tried to bring a prostitute] in the hope of so inciting him to lust that she might win a shameless victory over him. I don't know how this soldier of Christ did it, or how he summoned up his resolve. But will pleasure be the victor where torments fail? For at length, inspired by heaven, he bit off his tongue and spat it in her face, as she tried to kiss him. And so the immense pain which followed was stronger than the feeling of lust.

**Chapter IV.** At the time when these things were happening Paul was about 15 years old. He and his married sister had lost both their parents, who had left them a wealthy inheritance. He was highly educated in both Greek and Egyptian, a gentle soul, and a great lover of God. And when the storm of persecution exploded, he fled secretly to a distant village. And then: 'how is it that you have such power over the human breast, o dedicated desire for gold?' [Virgil's *Aeneid*, Bk 3] his brother-in-law, who should have sheltered him, sought to betray him. The tears of his wife, their common family ties, not even God who sees all from on high, could stop him in his wickedness. The pursuit of cruelty will drive people to extremes just as godliness does.

But when that most prudent youth heard of it, he fled to the mountains in the desert, until the persecutions should come to an end. But what had been forced upon him by necessity came to be something which he welcomed, and as he gradually moved away, bit by bit as necessary, he came at last upon a rocky mountain with a large cave at the foot of it and a large stone over the entrance. After removing the stone and going in, eager to explore the unknown with a human curiosity, he found a spacious chamber, with an opening to the sky above covered over by spreading branches of an ancient palm tree. There was a sparkling spring there, from which a stream overflowed through a little opening, and soaked away into the earth. There were also a few little buildings near the foot of the mountain containing the knives and anvils and mallets used to strike coins; Egyptian writings tell us that this used to be the site of a secret minting factory at the

time when Antony and Cleopatra were together.

**Ch. V.** Accepting gratefully this dwelling which God had given him, he began to spend his time in prayer and solitude. The palm tree provided him with both food and clothing. And lest you think that is impossible, I call Jesus and his holy Angels to witness that in that part of the desert next to the Saracens of Syria, I saw myself one of the monks who had been enclosed for thirty years living on barley bread and muddy water. There was another living in an old water cistern, in the pagan tongue of the Syrians known as a *cuba*, who survived on five dried figs a day. Such things might seem unbelievable to those outside the faith, but all things are possible to those who do believe.

**Chapter VI.** But to return from where I had digressed, by the time Paul reached the age of a hundred and thirteen, the ninety-year-old Antony was still living in another part of the desert. Antony used to say that it then occurred to him to wonder whether there was any monk in the desert more perfect than he was, and it was revealed to him at night while sleeping that there was one much better than he further into the mountain, and that he ought to make haste to visit him. As dawn broke, the venerable old man set out he knew not where, supporting his weak old limbs with the help of a staff. By the middle of the day with the sun hot overhead he was burning with the heat, but did not consider for a minute abandoning the journey once begun. "I believe in my God," he said, "who will show me his servant as he has promised." He had no sooner spoken than he saw a creature half man, half horse, which in the opinion of the poets is called a Hippocentaur. As soon as he saw it he signed himself on the forehead with the cross. "You, there!" he cried, "Whereabouts in these parts does the servant of God live?" The creature made strange, half crazy noises, mangling words which meant nothing, with a face all covered with bristly hair, while fawningly trying to make itself understood. It then pointed with its right hand in the desired direction, raced over the open countryside with the speed of a bird and vanished from sight. I don't rightly know whether this was an apparition sent by the devil to terrify him, or simply an animal spawned by the desert, which is a breeding ground for all sorts of monstrous beasts.

**Chapter VII.** Dumbfounded, Antony turned over in his mind what he had seen and went on a bit further. After a short time he saw a tiny little man in a stony hollow, with a hooked nose and horns on his forehead, with his lower parts ending in the hooves of a goat. Although apprehensive at this sight, Antony like the good warrior he was seized the shield of faith and the breastplate of hope (Ephesians 6:14). In spite of Antony's fears, this memorable creature by way of a

peace offering, offered him some dates as food for the journey, which he accepted and moved closer. "What are you?" Antony asked. "I am mortal," he replied, "and one of those denizens of the desert which the pagans worshipped under the names of Fauns, Satyrs and Incubi. I come to you as an envoy from my people. We beseech you that you will pray for us to our common God, who we know came to save the world, and sends out his sound into all lands" (Psalms 19.4). At these words our long-lived traveller's face was freely furrowed with tears, indicating the depth of joy pouring into his heart. For he was rejoicing in the glory of Christ who has overcome Satan, at the same time giving thanks that he could understand what the creature was saying. He struck his staff on the ground and cried out.

"Woe to you, Alexandria, who worship portents instead of God; woe to you, O city that has played the harlot, where demons congregate from all over the world! What can you say now? For the very beasts speak of Christ, while you still worship portents instead of Christ."

He had hardly finished speaking, when the horned animal fled as if it had wings. Lest anyone should be tempted to disbelieve any of this, remember that the whole world bears witness to the fact that during the reign of the Emperor Constantius, [died in 306. He was the father of Constantine the Great] a living creature like this was put on show in Alexandria, providing the people with an extraordinary sight. And later its dead body was taken to Antioch, preserved in salt lest it rot in the heat, where the Emperor himself saw it.

**Chapter VIII.** But to return to my story, Antony continued on his journey as he had begun, looking out for the tracks of wild beasts in the wide vastness of the desert. How he did it, and where his path took him, I know not. Another day had come to an end, finding him untroubled, as one who was confident that Christ would not desert him. He passed the second spell of darkness in prayer the whole night through, and in the dim light of dawn he saw a wolf, panting with a burning thirst, creeping towards the foot of a mountain. He watched where it went, and after it had reappeared out of a cave and gone away, he went towards the cave himself. He began to look inside, but could see nothing to satisfy his curiosity, for darkness obscured his vision. But as Scripture says, 'perfect love casts out fear' (I John 4.18), so he went in with slow steps and bated breath, like a skilled explorer. Little by little he went a bit further, with frequent pauses, until suddenly he heard a sound. And then through the oppressive sightless darkness he caught a glimpse of a light in the distance. He hastened towards it eagerly, and struck his foot against a stone, making another

loud noise. When the blessed Paul heard this, he closed the door which had been open, thinking that now he could shut the wolf out. Antony then walked about outside it, until it was later than the sixth hour, begging for admittance.

"You know who I am, where I came from, and why I have come," he said. "I know I don't deserve to see you. However, I shan't go away till I do. You take wild animals in to you. Why do you drive human beings away? I have searched for you and found you. I have knocked, so please open up! If I don't succeed, I shall die right outside your own doorposts. And you will have to bury my body."

He stayed there unmoving, persisting in bringing these things to mind. [Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book 2] To which the hero replied in a few words, thus. [Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book 6 ] "Certainly, no one asks like that if he is about to threaten trouble," he said, "and no one who is weeping such tears is likely to do anyone any harm. But why should you wonder that I have not opened my door, since you yourself have said that you are coming here to die?"

And Paul at last opened his door with a smile. They embraced each other, greeted each other by name, gave thanks to God together, gave each other a holy kiss, and sat down.

"There now!" said Paul. "Just look at what you have gone to so much trouble to find: nothing but uncared for grey hairs, covering limbs wasted with old age. See, I am nothing but a human being, and will soon be nothing but dust. But still, since 'charity bears all things' (1 Cor. 13.7), tell me how the human race is going on, whether new buildings have been going up in the ancient cities, how the world is governed, and if there is anyone left still under the power of the demons."

**Ch. IX.** As they were speaking, they saw a raven coming to rest in the branches of the tree. It gently flew down and placed a whole loaf of bread before their wondering eyes, before flying off again.

"How marvelous!" said Paul. "The kind and most merciful Lord for the last sixty years has been sending me half a loaf of bread. And now because of your coming, he has sent his servants a double measure!"

They gave thanks for the works of the Lord and sat down by the side of the sparkling spring. From then until evening time they had an argument about who should break the bread. Paul said that the guest should do so, Antony said the elder should. At last they came to a compromise, that each should take hold of one end of the loaf and pull, with the result that each would have a portion of the loaf in his hands. Each of them then drank a little water lying face downwards,

after which they spent the night in a vigil, offering God the sacrifice of praise.

**Chapter X.** When day at last returned to the earth, Paul had this to say to Antony. "For a long time, brother, I have known that you lived in these parts. He promised me that one day he would send you to be my fellow servant. But the time of my going is at hand, and I have ever been longing to 'depart and be with Christ' (Philippians 1:23).

'I have finished my course; I have kept the faith; there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.' (2 Tim. 4.7). The Lord has sent you to me to cover my body with earth; yes, indeed, you will give back earth to earth." Antony wept and lamented at the thought of being thus deserted, and prayed that he might share such a journey with him.

"You don't need to know your own end," said Paul, "but that of another. All you need to do is to follow the Lamb, until the time comes for you to lay down the burden of the flesh, and it will be for other brothers to follow the example of what you are now about to do. Hasten, therefore, before it is too late, and bring me the cloak which Archbishop Athanasius gave you, so that you can wrap my body in it."

Blessed Paul asked this, not because he greatly cared whether his body would rot either clothed or naked, for he had been clothed anyway for a very long time in clothes made from palm leaves, but that Antony's sadness over his coming death would be lessened if he were to go away.

**Chapter XI.** Antony was quite stunned by what Paul said about Athanasius and his cloak, but, as if he were listening to the words of Christ himself, with the fear of God in his heart, he did not dare do otherwise, but with silent tears he kissed Paul's eyes and hands, and returned to that monastery which later was occupied by the Saracens. His going was not to his liking, for his body was weak because of his age and his fasting, and yet his spirit enabled him to overcome the effects of age. His journey done, he arrived at last at his cell, tired out and panting for breath. The two disciples who had ministered to him for a very long time came running to meet him.

"Where have you been all this time, father?" they asked. "Woe is me, a sinner," he replied. "It is deceitful for me to be called a monk. For I have seen Elijah, and John the Baptist in the desert, and truly, Paul in paradise." He said no more, but beat his breast and took the cloak out of the cell.

"Won't you tell us any more about what is going on?" the disciples asked. "'There is a time for speaking and a time for keeping quiet,'"

(Ecclesiastes 3:7) he replied, and without taking even a small portion of food, went out and took the road by which he had just come, aching for Paul, longing to see him, making pictures of him in his mind. For he feared that in his absence, he might have given up his spirit to Christ. Which was, in fact, what had happened.

**Chapter XII.** For at the third hour of the next day he saw Paul, shining brightly in a robe as white as snow, ascending into heaven in the midst of choirs of prophets and angels, and immediately he fell on his face, threw sand all over his head, and wept and wailed. "Why have you left us, Paul?" he cried. "Why have you gone without bidding farewell? I have only now begun to know you; why have you so suddenly departed?"

The blessed Antony said later that he ran the rest of the way so quickly that it was as if he were flying. And rightly so. For when he went in to the cave he found Paul on his knees with his head and arms stretched out, his body motionless. Thinking at first that Paul was praying, he prayed also. But when he heard none of the usual responses being uttered, he rushed towards him with a tearful kiss, and realized that this was indeed the corpse of the holy man. And he offered the prayers for the dead to the God unto whom all things live.

**Chapter XIII.** He wrapped the body up and dragged it outside, singing the traditional Christian hymns and psalms. He was worried that he had no spade to dig the ground with, and turned the problem over in his mind, weighing up the various possibilities. "If I go back to the monastery," he said, "it will be a three day journey. But if I stay here, there is nothing I can do. So then, let me die here, as is fitting. Let me take my last breath, O Christ, next to your warrior, Paul."

In the midst of his perplexity he was suddenly aware of two lions bounding towards him out of the desert, their manes streaming out behind them. At first he was terrified, then turning his mind back towards God, he stood there quite calmly, as if it were only two doves he was looking at. The lions ran straight to the holy man's body, with their tails between their legs, lay down at his feet and roared loudly, so that Antony could not fail to understand that they were indeed mourning in the only way they knew how. Then they began to scrape away the earth at a little distance, hollowing out the sand to make a grave big enough for a human being. Then as if to seek a reward for their deed, they came towards Antony with their ears pricked up and their necks stretched out to lick his hands and feet. And he realized that they were asking for his blessing. Without delay he poured out praise to Christ, because even dumb animals looked to God. "O God, without whom not a leaf flutters down from the tree and not a



sparrow falls to the ground, (Matthew 10:29), be it unto these creatures according to your will."

And he motioned with his hand for them to go. After they had gone he carried the body on his bent and aged shoulders and put it in the grave, covered it over with earth, and built a mound over it according to the custom. Another day dawned, and Antony, as the only heir of this man who had died intestate, took possession of the tunic which Paul had woven for himself out of palm leaves in a basket weave pattern. And so he went back to his monastery, where he gave his disciples an account of everything that had happened. And from then on he always wore the tunic of Paul on the solemn feasts of Easter and Pentecost.

**Chapter XIV.** To conclude this little work, let me ask those who don't know the extent of their inheritance, who live in marble halls, and who make sure that an only son will benefit from all their wealth, whether this old man ever lacked anything in his nakedness. You drink from precious goblets, he was satisfied with his cupped hands, you wear tunics of golden thread, his clothing was rougher than that of your meanest slave. But to him in his deepest poverty the gates of paradise were opened, you with your gold will inherit hell. He, naked, was clothed with Christ, (Rom. 13:14) you in your silks have lost Christ's covering. Paul, buried in barren dust, will rise again in glory, you vaunting yourselves in sumptuous tombs, will burn with all your works. I beg you, share, share out at least some of your cherished riches. Why are your dead entombed in golden shrouds? How is it that your ambition is not slaked even in the midst of the tears of mourning? Do you imagine that the bodies of the dead will not rot if wrapped in silk? Whoever you are that reads this story, I beg that you will remember Jerome, a sinner, who if the Lord were to give him a choice, would much prefer the tunic of Paul with all its merit, than the purple of kings and their kingdoms.

The Life of Antony, by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (to be continued)

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The Desert Fathers were Christians who lived mainly in the Scetes desert of Egypt in the third century AD. The most well known was Anthony the Great (died 356). So many Christians moved to the desert that Athanasius wrote: "The desert had become a city." This movement was the first Christian revival. The Desert Fathers had a major influence on the development of Christianity.

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