

Athanasius

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Date: 09 October 2022

Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] So if you will, go with me to Hebrews chapter 12. Hebrews chapter 12. Reading from the ESV, the author of Hebrews writes, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

According to this passage, believers in Christ are running a race. It's not your typical race, however, because it's not the kind of race where you're competing with other people.

The goal is not to come in first in this case. The goal is to finish. Which may sound easy enough, but the author of Hebrews implies this is a long and grueling race.

He says, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. To finish this race, we must be patient, because it can be quite long.

We must persevere, because it can be quite difficult. How does the author suggest we endure all the way to the end? First, he exhorts us to lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely.

[1 : 39] As Christian discovered in the Pilgrim's Progress, the journey to the celestial city is made much easier when you don't have a great burden strapped to your back.

Second, the author tells us to keep our eyes on the finish line, which isn't so much a place as it is a person, namely, Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

We are essentially running away from sin, if you will, toward Christ, and as we look to him, he provides us a perfect model for running this very race.

He, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

He was able to perfectly, patiently, persevere through immense difficulty, because he kept his eyes on the joy that was set before him.

[2 : 42] He stared at that finish line until the race was over. So we run away from our sin and never look back, Jesus says, any man who puts his hand to the plow and looks back isn't fit for the kingdom of God.

Instead, we keep our eyes fixed on Christ and those eternal joys ahead. What did Paul tell the Corinthians? So we do not lose heart.

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient or temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

As one who ran cross-country in high school, and I'm going to admit up front that I was not the best runner and I was not the most committed, but I will testify that for me, the easiest parts of any race were the beginning and the end.

- [3 : 53] Always. At the start of the race, I had all the confidence in the world. I was full of adrenaline. I believed I could run well over the three miles that was required of me.
- And then at the end of the race, I could finally see the finish line. It was close enough that, you know, my entire body would get excited and I would find energy that I didn't think I had any longer.
- In fact, I remember getting in trouble with my coach on a few occasions. He'd say, stop saving all that energy for the end. If you can sprint to the finish line, you haven't used enough on the course.
- Those couple of miles in the middle of the race, however, were always a much different story. My pace would slow, my breathing would become labored, my form would fall apart, and most notably, my mind would get discouraged.
- You know, I'd hear those whispers that would say, you can't do it. You won't make it. You might as well give up now. And I believe the same is true for us as we run this race described in Hebrews.
- [5 : 03] The newly converted Christian shoots out of the gate with fervent zeal. Perhaps the mature elderly Christian is close enough to the finish line that he finds strength he didn't know he had any longer.
- But for all of those believers somewhere in the middle of the race, struggling to endure, how are those Christians to be helped? In short, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.
- When I ran cross-country, every course was a little different. Most of them had a path that weaved all over the place. It may go up and around hills. It may go on other sides of buildings.
- It would wind through trees, which made watching the race as a spectator pretty challenging. You know, as a runner, I would see spectators such as family members or whoever came to see the race, but I'd only see them at a few points during the race.
- I might see them at the one-mile mark, but I wouldn't see them again for another half-mile or more. Now, when I finally did see spectators, especially if they were people I knew, you know, my running form would suddenly return.
- [6 : 14] I'd begin breathing properly. My pace would quicken. There was something about being in their presence that motivated me to try harder.
- So all of those discouraging thoughts I had when I was left to myself, they would just vanish. They would disappear in an instant. Now, that's not exactly what the author of Hebrews is referring to here, but it's a similar idea.
- Perhaps a better analogy would be those moments when a fellow teammate is running alongside you. Enduring the race is somehow easier when you're enduring it with someone else, and you know they're going through the exact same thing you are.
- Glance back at Hebrews 10. That's precisely the point the author makes in Hebrews 10, verses 23 through 25.
- He says, Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.
- [7 : 31] And all the more as you see the day drawing near. The race we run as believers is made so much better because we run it together.
- We consider one another. We encourage one another. We frequently meet together for this purpose. So as this race continues, we don't distance ourselves from our teammates, if you will.

In fact, we're told to be increasingly adamant about sticking together and closer and closer as we near that finish line, as we see the day of Christ drawing near.

Even so, the author of Hebrews doesn't primarily have fellow believers in mind when he refers to this cloud of witnesses, not living believers anyway.

Instead, he's thinking about men and women of faith who have gone before us. He's thinking about believers who have died maybe centuries ago. How do I know that?

[8 : 44] Hebrews 11. Hebrews 12 begins, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Ignore that chapter break. The author didn't put it there. This passage is essentially a conclusion to the previous chapter, which provides us with several mini-biographies of people who were living testimonies to remarkable faith in God, from Abel to the prophets.

We read several accounts of people who ran the race with endurance. All these, the author says at the close of Hebrews 11, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect.

Now, I don't want to stretch the analogy too far, but it would seem that the race we run is kind of a relay race. Those believers who went before, they passed the baton, and we are called to take that baton and keep running.

Meanwhile, those who previously carried this baton of faith continue to serve as encouragements to us. Their part of the race is finished, but we're not finished with them.

[10 : 12] Notice what this book says about Abel in Hebrews 11, verse 4. By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.

And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. Oops.

I lost my... We'll survive without it, but... Got it?

Thank you. Thank you. Through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. And that is the basis for the study we begin today.

Over the course of the next several weeks, we will examine the lives and ministries of inspiring heroes of the faith. All of these people died long ago, but through their enduring testimonies, they still speak to us.

[11 : 27] They still have the ability to encourage us as we finish our portion of the race. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

So each week, we will consider one, possibly two, notable figures in church history. We'll examine their lives. In some cases, we'll talk about their conversions to Christ.

Most importantly, we'll study their faith and the impact that it had. We'll look to these saints of the past and, I pray, find encouragement in their stories.

Now, to be clear, I don't intend for these to be mere history lessons. I want us to see eternal truths reflected in their lives, often in the face of severe adversity.

I'll begin this series with a man by the name of Athanasius. If I could get the next slide. That handsome fellow was born just before the turn of the fourth century.

[12 : 42] And he spent his approximately 75 years on this earth earning for himself the nickname Athanasius Contra Moondum.

That is, Athanasius Against the World. That's quite a nickname. But it's even more compelling once you realize that Athanasius spent his entire life refusing to concede a theological debate over one letter in a single word.

And if that seems petty or trivial to you, I assure you it isn't and you'll see what I mean in just a moment. Now, I told you this wouldn't be a mere history lesson but some history, of course, is required.

We need some background, we need some context before we discuss the great theological fight of Athanasius' life. Now, by the time Athanasius is born, historians estimate that possibly 15% of people in the Roman Empire were Christians.

In other words, Christianity, this largely misunderstood and often hated religion, was reaching critical mass. In some parts of the empire, it represented a majority of people.

[14 : 04] In other parts, it represented a significant minority, including places such as Egypt and Northern Africa, which were, by the way, some of the wealthiest places in the empire.

I should also note that Christianity was gaining its strongest footholds not in rural areas, as we might think, but in the big cities. So despite all the years of persecution against her, the church was growing in both size and influence.

Perhaps then, it is unsurprising that eventually a Roman emperor would take notice. And instead of trying to stop the movement, he would actually attempt to befriend it.

Well, Emperor Constantine took it a step further by actually converting to Christianity. Christianity. Now, if you're familiar with church history, you probably know the name Constantine.

At his father's death, he became emperor of the Roman Empire in A.D. 306. Athanasius was approximately eight years old at the time.

[15 : 18] Well, seven years later, Constantine wins a major battle, and he later attributes his victory to God. What happened was, before the victory, he sees a cross in the sky.

And he sees that as a sign from God that victory is coming. So he takes that cross and he paints it on the shields of all of his army.

And, they won the battle. This, many historians say, compelled Constantine to become a Christian. Was his conversion genuine?

I don't know. But when Constantine returned to Rome, he refused to offer a sacrifice to the pagan goddess of victory as every other emperor had done before him.

More importantly, he declared Christianity to be a state-sanctioned, altogether legal religion in the empire. So suddenly, Christians became a protected, if not favored, class of people.

[16 : 29] Now, to be clear, it wouldn't remain that way forever. And not every Christian was always protected because of this volatile relationship between state and church at the time. Constantine, for example, often inserted himself into church affairs, and he made these binding judgments regarding theological disagreements, which meant dissenters would then lose some of their protections.

It's pretty interesting to think about life in those days. Christianity goes from illegal and persecuted to legal almost overnight.

And it wasn't just legalized. The emperor himself is now a Christian who has a very keen interest in the church and in her doctrines. So almost overnight, believers are able to step out of the shadows and practice their religion in the light of day.

Suddenly, people all over the empire, they're discussing the Bible in public, right on the city street. You hardly hear that today. Which leads to the great controversy of Athanasius' life.

In Alexandria, Egypt, and this will be very easy to remember, a man by the name of Alexander, was bishop. Tensions began rising between Bishop Alexander of Alexandria and a relatively popular, well-spoken deacon by the name of Arius.

[17 : 58] Now, before we talk about the source of that tension, you should know that Athanasius was a newly ordained deacon serving as an assistant to Alexander. So while he's not yet the main character in the story, he's right there in the background.

In fact, as we'll discover, he's actually quite involved. The controversy began in A.D. 319. Arius wrote a letter to Alexander that called into question the orthodox understanding of the Son of God.

Since Jesus is the Son, and Scripture refers to Him as begotten, Arius argued that God the Father must have created Christ the Son.

In other words, there must have been a time when the Son did not exist. Now, keep in mind, this is fairly early in church history. So while orthodox, biblical views regarding the Trinity and the identity of Christ were established, they were established, in fact, 200 years earlier by the apostles, the church is still formulating the best ways to articulate these doctrines.

I mean, how do you explain the Trinity? We're still struggling with that. How do you define Jesus' person as both God and the Son of God? perhaps inevitably, people came up with different ideas to explain these profound and mysterious realities, and, you know, it just isn't easy for the finite human brain to comprehend an infinite God, but, of course, we try.

[19 : 42] And when we do, church history reveals that we are often prone to make even heretical mistakes. In our efforts to remove remove the mysteries of God, men tend to reduce him down to something he's not, and Arius was one of these men.

Arius' theory about Christ called into question his very deity. If Jesus is a created being, he may be superior to all other created beings, but he can't be God.

He may be similar to God in the way that any son is similar to his father, but he's not the same. He's not God. That was Arius' argument.

So in response, Alexander, with the help of Athanasius and others, came up with a word or a technical term, if you will, that would clearly define and kind of simplify the real issue at hand.

And the word they used was homo homo ousius. Homo ousius. That is, same substance or essence. Could we have the next slide? Now, you won't find that word in the Bible, but like many other theological terms, it provided some clarity.

[21 : 04] The debate was not over whether the son is the same person as the father. as our Baptist confession affirms, the Trinity quote, consists of three real persons, the father, the word or son, and the Holy Spirit.

No, the debate was over substance. Arius, or at least his supporters, responded with their own word. They said, no, no, no, not homo ousius.

They said, homo ousius. which means similar substance or similar essence. And with these two words, the debate was simplified.

The dividing line was drawn. One either believed Jesus possessed the same substance of the father or similar substance as the father.

Arius said they were of similar substance. Alexander, Athanasius, and frankly Christian Orthodoxy said they are the same substance. So in Greek, the debate came down to a single letter.

[22 : 16] By the way, Athanasius was not a quiet bystander, even at the beginning of this controversy. He wasn't the bishop, but he was busy publishing apologetic books in defense of the biblical view of the Trinity and the full deity of Christ.

And he wrote the official disposition of Arius in AD 321. Arius was excluded by the church in Alexandria for his heresy, and Athanasius was tasked with writing his official disposition.

Meanwhile, Arius was trying to garner support for his cause. He was a very persuasive man, but he didn't have much success in Alexandria.

So he started writing letters to bishops all over the world, which did prove relatively successful. He was successful enough, in fact, that the dispute caught the attention of Emperor Constantine.

Constantine liked the idea of bringing uniformity to the church. He wanted the matter settled. He wanted the debate ended, so he did something that had never been done before, not on this scale.

[23 : 34] He called for an ecumenical or universal council of the church to come together, discuss the matter, take a vote, and decide it once and for all.

This had never been done on this scale. Maybe some regional councils. So unless you maybe count the Jerusalem council in Acts chapter 15 over circumcising Gentiles, a council of this nature had never been tried before.

in A.D. 325, and some say this is the most important date in church history. You can argue that if you want. 300 bishops were invited by Constantine to gather at his imperial palace in Nicaea, which is a fascinating point in church history because some of these very men had been beaten and imprisoned under Roman authority.

And now they're being welcomed into the imperial palace to be heard by the emperor himself. In fact, Constantine, who presided over the council, addressed these men as my most dear brothers.

What a change. Alexander proceeded to write a relatively brief creed to both clarify his position and give it some measure of formality.

[25 : 02] This creed became known as the Nicene Creed. And here's the most relevant part of it, if you want to switch slides. It says, we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made.

Notice that phrase, one substance. It's two words in English, but it's a translation of the single word in Greek, homo ousios, or same substance.

Needless to say, Arius and his supporters hated the wording of the Nicene Creed. But it didn't matter, Constantine liked it. I don't know whether he understood it, I don't know whether he cared to understand it, but he liked it nonetheless, and he gave the council two options.

They could either sign the Creed, or be exiled. And you won't be surprised to learn that the vast majority signed it.

Though, of course, they later found ways to argue that the wording actually supported their view, if you look closely. Some even say that they inserted that extra letter into the word just before they signed it.

[26 : 38] I don't know whether that's true or not. You should also know that the majority of bishops who signed the Nicene Creed, even if they agreed with it, they didn't like calling people heretics.

They wanted everybody to just get along. So, regardless of what they believed about the deity of Christ, they wanted men like Alexander and Athanasius to stop fighting so hard for this cause.

Just let it go. Three years after the Nicene Creed, Alexander died, leaving Athanasius to become bishop of Alexandria in his place.

Athanasius then had jurisdiction over all the bishops in Egypt and Libya, and under his leadership, Arianism, as it became known, altogether disappeared from the region.

Unfortunately, though, it continued to spread through the rest of the empire, and Arians continued to push for changes to the Nicene Creed. Athanasius refused to back down.

[27 : 46] The more opposition he faced, the more boldly he defended the truth of Christ's deity. And in response, his opponents began hurling all kinds of accusations at him.

He was too young to be a bishop, they said. He practiced forms of dark magic. He was a dangerous troublemaker. He levied illegal taxes, and on and on the accusations went.

And eventually, Emperor Constantine got a little tired of Athanasius. He began to think to himself, maybe he is a troublemaker. Though the evidence acquitted him, Athanasius' critics continued to accuse him of various wrongdoings, and in AD 336, Constantine finally banished him.

One year later, Constantine died, leaving his three sons to reign in his place.

The empire was divided into three parts. One of his sons, Constantine II, restored Athanasius to his office. Only two years later, however, another son by the name of Constantius took ecclesiastical power into his own hands.

[29 : 03] He wanted to rule the church and once again, banished Athanasius. He left in AD 339 and did not return until AD 346.

That's a total of seven years away. Now, for the sake of time, I'll have to skip over quite a few details as we continue. I won't have time to explain all of the politics involved.

But skipping ahead, Constantine decided to seize control of Alexandria. So in AD 356, this is a really spectacular moment if you try to imagine it in a place like this today.

In AD 356, his army storm into the largest city there in, I guess it was Alexandria, and Athanasius is preparing the Lord's Supper for the congregation at that very moment.

When the soldiers enter, Athanasius tells the deacons to lead the church in reciting Psalm 136. So as the soldiers move closer and closer to the front of the church, the congregation is repeating, for his steadfast love endures forever.

[30 : 26] You can almost imagine, the soldiers take a step, for his steadfast love endures forever. For his steadfast love endures forever. They keep repeating it. The soldiers get closer and closer. They're coming for Athanasius.

The other bishops are begging Athanasius to flee from the building, but he refuses to go. So finally, a few of the church leaders, they grab him and they physically carry him out, taking him away to safety.

Athanasius would not return to Alexandria for another six years. He would live in isolation in the middle of the desert where he was fiercely guarded by some of his brothers in the faith.

Those years in exile, though, were not wasted. He wrote some of the most important works he ever produced during that time, including many that, of course, defended the full deity of Christ.

Athanasius returned to Alexandria in AD 363. And ironically enough, it was a pagan emperor by the name of Julian who took power and lifted his band, which lasted about eight months.

[31 : 47] Upon his return, Athanasius continued to preach, he continued to teach and defend and spread the biblical view of Christ, and Julian didn't like it. As a devout pagan, he didn't like anyone who took his Christianity as seriously as Athanasius.

So Athanasius spent another 15 months in exile. Once again, Athanasius returned to Alexandria, only to be exiled a fifth time by the next emperor.

Emperor Valens attempted to actually hunt him down, but he escaped before he could be captured. Valens, though, he quickly changed his mind.

He realized that the city of Alexandria loved Athanasius, and he began to fear that a revolt might take place, so he restored Athanasius after only a few months. Athanasius then spent the final seven years of his life in relative peace, pastoring the church, shepherding other pastors, and promoting the cause of orthodoxy throughout the empire.

He died in A.D. 373. Perhaps you now understand how Athanasius became known as Athanasius Contra Mundum, Athanasius against the world.

[33 : 19] When influential leaders from all over the empire opposed him, he stood his ground in defense of the truth.

When murderous soldiers stormed into the church, he stood his ground. When the most powerful emperors on the planet turned against him, he stood his ground.

Through years and years of isolation and exile, he stood his ground. He believed the Bible and he refused to believe anything contrary to it.

As he once wrote, divine scripture is sufficient above all things. If I could get the next slide. Thank you. In 1 John 5, the apostle John writes, says, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.

And everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments.

[34 : 29] And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith.

I love that word overcomes, which is sometimes translated conquered. It's used repeatedly throughout the New Testament and implies that believers are not only running a race, I'm going to stretch this analogy a little bit further, we're not only running a race, we are not only running a long distance race, we're not only running a long distance relay race, but it would seem that we are running a long distance relay hurdle race.

Obviously, if we are supposed to conquer or overcome, there must be obstacles in the path. We must face things that make the race more difficult, things that try to prevent us from finishing the race.

And I suspect we can all relate to this. Discouragement, setbacks, opposition, temptations, the flesh, the devil, the world, these are just a few of the hurdles we regularly face and strive to overcome day by day.

Thankfully, we have a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us. And like Abel, even though they are dead, they still speak through their faith.

[36 : 04] We can look behind us at men such as Athanasius and be encouraged by their courageous, faithful endurance as they conquered some of the highest hurdles.

I mean, I can only imagine what it was like for Athanasius to risk his life and live so much of his ministry in exile.

For what? For the sake of the truth. For the sake of a single letter, albeit one with absolutely vital theological significance.

One letter. Furthermore, like Paul, Athanasius could say of his own circumstances, we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.

We are perplexed, but not in despair. We are persecuted, but not abandoned. We are struck down, but not destroyed. How do I know he felt this way?

[37 : 02] Consider what he wrote. Let's go to the last slide. Let us be courageous and rejoice always. Let us consider and lay to heart that while the Lord is with us, our foes can do us no hurt.

If they see us rejoicing in the Lord, contemplating the bliss of the future, mindful of the Lord, deeming all things in His hands, they are discomfited, made to feel uneasy, and turned backwards.

Even in the face of persecution, Athanasius saw no reason to be discouraged. What can our foes really do to us? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Now, don't be discouraged by the inevitable challenges we face in this Christian race of ours. Instead, we ought to heed Athanasius' exhortation to contemplate the bliss of the future.

You know? Stare ahead at the joy set before us. He said we should be mindful of the Lord. Hebrews 12 says, let us run with endurance the race set before us, looking to Jesus.

[38 : 23] And lastly, Athanasius reminds us of God's sovereignty, doesn't he? Deeming all things in His hand. If we learn from Athanasius and follow his example, when we find ourselves in similar difficulties, similar situations, he says our enemies will be discomfited and turned backwards.

They'll be perplexed. They don't know what to do with us. If their goal is to break us and discourage us to the point of quitting, they will be utterly confused when they see us still rejoicing in the Lord despite their best efforts to crush us.

There's plenty in this world already to discourage us. Though I'd say the Lord has provided graciously when we compare our circumstances to those of Athanasius.

Even so, we may find ourselves afflicted and perplexed and struck down. But let us be courageous and let us rejoice always.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[39 : 52] My mind keeps going back to that passage as I read about the life of Athanasius. Now in closing, I'll mention just one more notable lesson that we can learn from Athanasius.

The Lord's brother Jude writes, Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

You know, even beyond the truth of Christ's full deity, there are biblical doctrines worth defending at any cost. there are hills we shouldn't die on, that's for sure, but there are hills we should, and we should no matter what the personal cost to us.

We certainly see that in the life of Athanasius, perhaps we could see so much more, but we'll leave it right there. Thank you.