

BASIL THE GREAT

THE LESSON: INTO THE DESERT

*“For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions —is not from the Father but is from the world.”
(1 John 2:16)*

Around the third century, stories began to be told of believers fleeing to the Egyptian desert in order to lead holy lives by leaving behind the distractions and temptations of worldly life. The oldest biographies we have are of Paul the Hermit and Anthony the Great, both of whom sought solitude in the desert. This solitude was hard to maintain for the early desert monks, since others often came to them seeking guidance or training. It was Pachomius the Great who first established a “rule” so that an organized community of monks could live holy lives together, yet apart from the world.

But while the desert communities grew, the Roman world changed as well. Hostility towards Christianity subsided, and eventually the faith was adopted as the official religion of the state. The nominal conversion of an empire meant that lines which were previously clear became blurred, and the leaders of the Church gained in prominence, wealth and power. As these changes unfolded in the cities, the appeal of the desert communities became like a beacon to those who were wary of becoming complacent in their faith and corrupted by the world.

*“The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”
(1 Corinthians 1:25)*

Basil was born into an affluent believing family in Caesarea (modern-day Turkey) about the year 330. He had numerous siblings, many of whom are also venerated as saints, in particular his elder sister Macrina, and brothers Naucratus, Peter and Gregory.

Basil’s father wished him to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer, so he was given an elite education away from home. When he returned, he did so with an attitude of superiority, having been immersed in the study of the great pagan intellects of that era. Of this, Basil wrote:

“Much time had I spent in vanity, and had wasted nearly all my youth in the vain labour which I underwent in acquiring the wisdom made foolish by God. Then... like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvellous light of the truth of the Gospel, and I perceived the uselessness of ‘the wisdom of the princes of this world, that come to naught.’”

*“Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace,
along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”
(2 Timothy 2:22)*

At home Basil’s quieter siblings had set aside the attractions of the world to live humble, contemplative lives. Basil was sobered by the death of both his father and his brother Naucratus and greatly influenced by his sister Macrina, who pointed him to the study of scripture and the disciplines of the desert. And so to the desert regions of Egypt and Syria Basil went, visiting both solitary monks and monastic communities, and learning all he could. When he returned home this time, it was in a different spirit, and Basil established a monastic community for men, while his sister Macrina had already established one for women.

It was a mere twenty years between Basil’s baptism and his death, but Basil made very good use of the time he had. He was made bishop of Caesarea, became an influential theologian, defended the faith against the heresies of his day, and created a rule for monastic communities that balanced prayer with the humble service of others. Basil was so beloved that at his death even the unbelievers joined in mourning him.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: ST. BASIL THE GREAT, “LETTER CCXXIII: AGAINST EUSTATHIUS OF SEBASTEIA” FROM “LETTERS AND SELECTED WORKS”, ED. PHILIP SCHAFF, HENRY WACE | DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | GERARD SAMPSON, “LAYMAN’S BOOK OF SAINTS”.)

BASIL THE GREAT

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Basil that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

O God, our heavenly Father, who didst raise up thy faithful servant Basil to be a Bishop in thy Church and to feed thy flock: We beseech thee to send down upon all thy Bishops, the Pastors of thy Church, the abundant gift of thy Holy Spirit, that they, being endued with power from on high, and ever walking in the footsteps of thy holy Apostles, may minister before thee in thy household as true servants of Christ and stewards of thy divine mysteries; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A BISHOP, P. 312)