

## **THE LIFE OF ST. PAUL THE FIRST HERMIT**

### **By Saint Jerome**

During the reign of Decius and Valerian, a fierce tempest made havoc of many churches in Egypt and the Thebaid. It was the Christian's prayer in those days that he might, for Christ's sake, die by the sword. Now at this very time, the death of both parents left Paul heir to great wealth in the Lower Thebaid: his sister was already married. He was then about fifteen years of age, excellently versed alike in Greek and Egyptian letters, of a gentle spirit, and a strong lover of God. When the storm of persecution began its thunder, he betook himself to a farm in the country, for the sake of its remoteness and secrecy.

His sister's husband began to meditate the betrayal of the lad whom it was his duty to conceal. Neither the tears of his wife, nor the bond of blood, nor God looking down upon it all from on high, could call him back from the crime, spurred on by a cruelty that seemed to ape religion. The boy, far-sighted as he was, had the wit to discern it, and took flight to the mountains, there to wait while the persecution ran its course. What had been his necessity became his free choice.

Little by little he made his way, sometimes turning back and again returning, till at length he came upon a rocky mountain, and at its foot at no great distance, a huge cave, its mouth closed by a stone. There is a thirst in men to pry into the unknown: he moved the stone, and eagerly exploring came within a spacious courtyard open to the sky, roofed by the wide spreading branches of an ancient palm, and with a spring of clear shining water: a stream ran hasting from it and was soon drunk again, through a narrow opening, by the same earth that had given its waters birth. There were moreover, not a few dwelling-places in that hollow mountain, where one might see chisels and records declare that the place was a mint for coining false money, at the time that Antony was joined to Cleopatra.

So then, in this beloved habitation, offered to him as if it were by God Himself, he lived his life in constant prayer and solitude: the palm-tree provided him with food and clothing. And lest this should seem impossible to any I call Jesus to witness and His holy angels, that I myself, in that part of the desert which marches with Syria and the Saracens, have seen monks, one of whom lived a recluse for thirty years, on barely bread and muddy water: another in an ancient well (which in the heathen speech of Syria is called a quba) kept himself in life on five dry figs a day. These things will seem incredible to those who believe not that all things are possible to him that believeth.

But to return to that place from which I have wandered; for a hundred and thirteen years the Blessed Paul lived the life of heaven upon earth, while in another part of the desert Antony abode, an old man of ninety years. And as Antony himself would tell, there came suddenly into his mind the thought that no better monk than he had his dwelling in the desert. But as he lay quiet that night it was revealed to him that there was deep in the desert another better by far than he, and that he must make haste to visit him. And straightway as day was breaking the venerable old man set out, supporting his feeble limbs on his staff, to go he knew not whither. And now came burning noon, the scorching sun overhead, yet would he not flinch from the journey begun, saying, "I believe in my God that He will shew me His servant as He said."

Advancing little by little, and often standing still, his ear caught a sound. Afar off, in the dread blindness of the dark he saw a light; hurrying too eagerly, he struck his foot against a stone, and raised a din. At the sound the Blessed Paul shut the door which had been open, and bolted it. Then did Antony fall upon the ground outside the door, and there he prayed for admittance until the sixth hour and beyond it. "Who I am," said he, "and whence, and why I have come, thou knowest. I

know that I am not worthy to behold thee: nevertheless, unless I see thee, I go not hence. Thou who receivest beasts, why dost thou turn away men? I have sought, and I have found: I knock, that it may be opened to me. But if I prevail not, here shall I die before thy door. Assuredly thou wilt bury my corpse.”

And so he stood, pleading and fixed there, to him the hero answered, in few words: “No man pleads thus, who comes to threaten: no man comes to injure, who comes in tears: and dost thou marvel that I receive thee not, if it is a dying man that comes?” And so jesting, Paul set open the door. And the two embraced each other and greeted one another by their names, and together returned thanks to God. And after the holy kiss, Paul sat down beside Antony, and began to speak: “Behold him whom thou hast sought with so much labour, a shaggy white head and limbs worn out with age. Behold, thou lookest on a man that is soon to be dust. Yet because love endureth all things, tell me, I pray thee, how fares the human race: if new roofs be risen in the ancient cities, whose empire is it that now sways the world; and if any still survive snared in the error of the demons.”

And as they talked they perceived that a crow had settled on a branch of the tree, and softly flying down deposited a whole loaf before their wondering eyes. And when he had withdrawn, “Behold,” said Paul, “God hath sent us our dinner, God the merciful, God the compassionate. It is now sixty years since I have had each day a half loaf of bread; but at thy coming, Christ hath doubled His soldiers’ rations.” And when they had given thanks to God, they sat down beside the margin of the crystal spring. But now sprang up a contention between them as to who should break the bread, that brought the day well nigh to evening, Paul insisting on the right of the guest, Antony countering by right of seniority. At length they agreed that each should take hold of the loaf and pull toward himself, and let each take what remained in his hands. Then they drank a little water, holding their mouths to the spring: and offering to God the sacrifice of praise, they passed the night in vigil.

But as day returned to the earth, the Blessed Paul spoke to Antony. “From old time, my brother, I have known that thou wert a dweller in these parts: from old time God had promised that thou, my fellow-servant, wouldst come to me. But since the time has come for sleeping, and (for I have ever desired to be dissolved and to be with Christ) the race is run, there remaineth for me a crown of righteousness; thou hast been sent by God to shelter this poor body in the ground, returning earth to earth.”

At this, Antony, weeping and groaning, began pleading with him not to leave him, but take him with him as a fellow-traveler on that journey. “Thou must not,” said the other, “seek thine own, but another’s good. It were good for thee, the burden of the flesh flung down, to follow the Lamb: but it is good for the other brethren that they should have thine example for their grounding. Wherefore, I pray thee, unless it be too great a trouble, go and bring the cloak which Athanasius the Bishop gave thee, to wrap around my body.” This indeed the blessed Paul asked, not because he much cared whether his dead body should rot covered or naked, for indeed he had been clothed for so long time in woven palm-leaves: but he would have Antony far from him, that he might spare him the pain of his dying.

Then Antony, amazed that Paul should have known of Athanasius and the cloak, dared make no answer: it seemed to him that he saw Christ in Paul, and he worshipped God in Paul’s heart: silently weeping, he kissed his eyes and his hands, and set out on the return journey to the monastery. His steps indeed could not keep pace with his spirit: yet though length of days had broken a body worn out with fasting, his mind triumphed over his years. Exhausted and panting, he reached his

dwelling, the journey ended. Two disciples who of long time had ministered to him, ran to meet him, saying, "Where hast thou so long tarried, Master?"

"Woe is me," he made answer, "that do falsely bear the name of monk. I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, yea, I have seen Paul in paradise." And so with tight-pressed lips and his hand beating his breast, he carried the cloak from his cell. To his disciples eager to know more of what was toward, he answered, "There is a time to speak, and there is a time to be silent." And leaving his abode, and not even taking some small provision for the journey, he again took the road by which he had come: athirst for him, longing for the sight of him, eyes and mind intent. For he feared as indeed befell, that in his absence, Paul might have rendered back to Christ the spirit he owed Him.

And now the second day dawned upon him, and for three hours he had been on the way, when he saw amid a host of angels and amid the companies of prophets and apostles, Paul climbing the steps of heaven, and shining as white as snow. And straightway falling on his face he threw sand upon his head and wept saying, "Paul, why didst thou send me away? Why dost thou go with no leave-taking? So tardy to be known, art thou so swift to go?"

In aftertime, the Blessed Antony would tell how speedily he covered the rest of the road, as it might be a bird flying. Nor was it without cause. Entering the cave, he saw on its bent knees, the head erect and the hands stretched out to heaven, the lifeless body: yet first, thinking he yet lived, he knelt and prayed beside him. Yet no accustomed sigh of prayer came to him: he kissed him, weeping, and then knew that the dead body of the holy man still knelt and prayed to God, to whom all things live.

So then he wrapped the body round and carried it outside, chanting the hymns and psalms of Christian tradition. But sadness came on Antony, because he had no spade to dig the ground. His mind was shaken, turning this way and that. For if I should go back to the monastery, he said, it is a three days' journey: if I say here there is no more that I can do. Let me die, therefor, as is meet: and falling beside the soldier, Christ, let me draw my last breath.

But even as he pondered, behold two lions came coursing, their manes flying, from the inner desert, and made towards him. At sight of them, he was at first in dread: then, turning his mind to God, he waited undismayed, as though he looked on doves. They came straight to the body of the holy dead, and halted by it wagging their tails, then couched themselves at his feet, roaring mightily; and Antony well knew they were lamenting him, as best they could. Then, going a little way off, they began to scratch up the ground with their paws, vying with one another in throwing up the sand, thereupon, as though to ask the reward of their work they came up to Antony, with drooping ears and down-bent heads, licking his hands and feet. He saw that they were begging for his blessing; and pouring out his soul in praise to Christ for that even the dumb beasts feel that there is God, "Lord," he said, "without whom no leaf lights from the tree, nor a single sparrow falls upon the ground, give unto these even as Thou knowest."

Then, motioning with his hand, he signed to them to depart. And when they had gone away, he bowed his aged shoulders under the weight of the holy body: and laying it in the grave, he gathered the earth above it, and made the wonted mound. Another day broke: and then, lest the pious heir should receive none of the goods of the intestate, he claimed for himself the tunic which the saint had woven out of palm-leaves as one weaves baskets. And so returning to the monastery, he told the whole story to his disciples in order as it befell: and on the solemn feasts of Easter and Pentecost, he wore the Tunic of Paul.

I pray you, whoever ye be who read this, that ye be mindful of Jerome the sinner: who, if the

Lord gave him his choice, would rather have the tunic of Paul with his merits, than the purple of Kings with their thrones.