

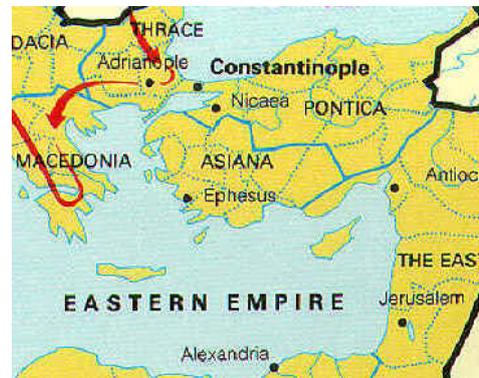
ATHANASIUS

Exile is a painful thing. The person being exiled is forced to leave home, family, country, employment, and everything with which he is familiar. Some people have been exiled wrongfully (see the Apostle John). Some people have been exiled more than once (see Napoleon Bonaparte). Athanasius was exiled 5 times. He could have avoided all of this pain if he would simply have denied that the Lord Jesus was the eternal Son of God. **THAT** he emphatically would not do. Facing opposition, false accusations, fierce criticism, dishonor, and misunderstanding, Athanasius remained faithful to the truth of God, insisting that the Lord Jesus was the uncreated Creator, the eternal Son of God.

Nicaea

Of course, that is what the Bible teaches. Initially, there was no question about this and anyone teaching otherwise was teaching heresy of the gravest kind. The vast majority of Bible teachers – as well as the numerous companies of believers – all believed and taught this. But a man named Arius began teaching that the Lord Jesus was not eternal – that He was a created being. (Arius is the “father” of numerous cults today that still try to propagate his heresy). He popularized his error by putting it into verse in short little songs that were easy to remember.

Realizing how grave this false teaching was, Christian leaders and elders came from far and near to the city of Nicaea (located in modern-day Turkey) summoned by the Emperor Constantine, who was more interested in unity and peace in his empire than in doctrinal precision. At Nicaea, believers formulated the famous Nicene Creed to make clear to all the eternal nature of the Son of God. Here is the part of it dealing with the Lord Jesus:



“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And 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.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.”

Not so nicea

But error is insidious, and both Biblical and secular history make it clear that no truth is attacked with greater venom than truth about God’s beloved Son. Pagans, as well as those who were merely Christian in name, found Arius’s teaching appealing and his catchy songs easy to remember. Although the council had condemned Arius as a heretic, exiled him, and made it a capital offense to possess his writings, within a few months his supporters talked Constantine into ending Arius’s exile. With a few private additions, Arius (slyly) even signed the Nicene Creed. Then the enemies of Athanasius spread false charges against him. He was accused of murder, illegal taxation, sorcery, and treason—the last of which

led Constantine to exile him to Trier, (now a German city near Luxembourg). Constantine died two years later, and Athanasius returned to Alexandria. But in his absence, Arianism had gained the upper hand.

Athanasius Contra Mundum

Now church leaders were against Athanasius, and they banished him again. This happened three more times. For 17 years, Athanasius suffered for Christ, a lone voice preaching truth. Arguing from Scripture, fearlessly reproaching error, writing from refuge in the desert, along the Nile or in the crowded suburbs around Alexandria, Athanasius continued the fight. His unbounded courage and dogged loyalty – even when banished by the Emperor, dishonored, and condemned by pagans and some professing Christians

– gave rise to the phrase: “Athanasius contra mundum” (“Athanasius against the world”). He was finally able to return home in 366. By then he was about 70 years old.

Here is how historians have described him: Athanasius’s *“bright mind was linked to an aggressive, contentious personality that drove his opponents crazy but strengthened him through years of conflict and exile. Perhaps only a person such as Athanasius possessed the intelligence, industriousness, and persistence to weather the theological warfare that dominated the fourth century.”* Robert Payne observes that *“in the history of the early Church no one was ever so implacable, so urgent in his demands upon himself or so derisive of his enemies. There was something in him of the temper of the modern dogmatic revolutionary: **nothing stopped him.**”*

We owe a great debt to this African man. A short, dark-skinned Egyptian, he was derisively called “Black Dwarf” by his enemies. But he stood tall, so very tall, for God and for Christ in a moment of extreme crisis. In the end, he carried the day. It was the false teaching of his foes that was exiled from orthodox Christianity. Those who love the Lord Jesus and cherish the honor of His sacred Name can learn much from the tenacious loyalty of this man and should thank God for his devotion to Christ.

C. S. Lewis wrote: *“We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same. He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius— into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.”*



Some technical stuff:

“One of the greatest illustrations of the necessity of contending to the uttermost to preserve the truth of the scriptures is the controversy between Athanasius and the Arians, a strife over a diphthong, or one letter. Was the Son of God of the same essence with the Father (homoousios), or of similar essence (homoiousios)? It seemed to many that the dispute was a hopeless dispute over trifles. How could Christianity hinge upon one letter? Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* made merry over the situation, the whole world convulsed over a diphthong! But there is only one letter’s difference between theist and atheist and yet the difference in meaning is infinite. Harnack, the great church historian, realized that Christianity itself was at stake, and that the Arian doctrine that Christ was only like the Father in essence led inevitably back to heathenism. **Thus, due to the iron will and resolute determination of Athanasius, the Christian faith was saved, humanly speaking, from becoming simply another historical, but legendary, religion.**”