

# Athanasius

*by Simonetta Carr*

with Illustrations by Matt Abraxas



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*Athanasius*

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MAP CREATED BY TOM CARROLL



When Athanasius was born, the Roman Empire was divided into two parts—the Western Empire and the Eastern Empire. Athanasius was born in the East.

## Introduction



**A**thanasius was born in Alexandria, Egypt, almost three hundred years after Jesus' birth. He is remembered because he defended the teaching that Jesus is the eternal God, equal to the Father—even when defending that truth meant that he had to leave his country and risk his life. This is the teaching that many of you confess in church when you recite the Nicene Creed.

After Jesus' death, Christians were often mistreated and even killed. The Roman government considered them dangerous because they refused to worship the Roman gods and claimed to be citizens of a heavenly kingdom. When people are made to suffer because of what they believe, we say that they are *persecuted*.



COURTESY OF GIOVANNI FABRIANI

### An artist's interpretation of Athanasius

*No one knows what Athanasius looked like. The earliest portraits available today were done about a thousand years after his death, according to the artists' imaginations. This portrait was done in the sixteenth century.*



Diocletian, emperor  
of the Eastern  
Roman Empire from  
284 to 305

PHOTO BY GIOVANNI DAL'ORTO,  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Galerius, emperor  
of the Eastern  
Roman Empire from  
305 to 311

PHOTO BY SHINJIROD,  
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## CHAPTER ONE

# Young Athanasius



We don't know the exact year of Athanasius's birth, but he was probably a young child when Diocletian, emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, started one of the worst persecutions against Christians, which in Egypt was particularly long and violent. When Diocletian retired in 305, the persecution became even worse under his successor, Galerius. Churches were destroyed and Scriptures burned. Many Christians lost their jobs, their homes, and often their lives without a chance to defend themselves. This must have left a strong impression on young Athanasius's mind.



Athanasius was a young child at the time of the Great Persecution of Emperor Diocletian.



Constantine, Roman emperor  
from 306 to 337

PHOTO BY MARIE-LAN NGUYEN,  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Finally, in 312, a man named Constantine, who was then the emperor of the Western Roman Empire, announced that he had become a Christian. It was a big surprise, because no emperor had ever been a Christian before. The following year, he sent out a decree that the Christian religion should be accepted. Soon after that, the persecution ended, even in the East.

Athanasius was a teenager when the persecution ended. At that time, the churches in Egypt were led by a man named Alexander. The men in charge of all the churches in a large area or country were called *bishops*. Alexander was one of the most important bishops in the Eastern Empire.



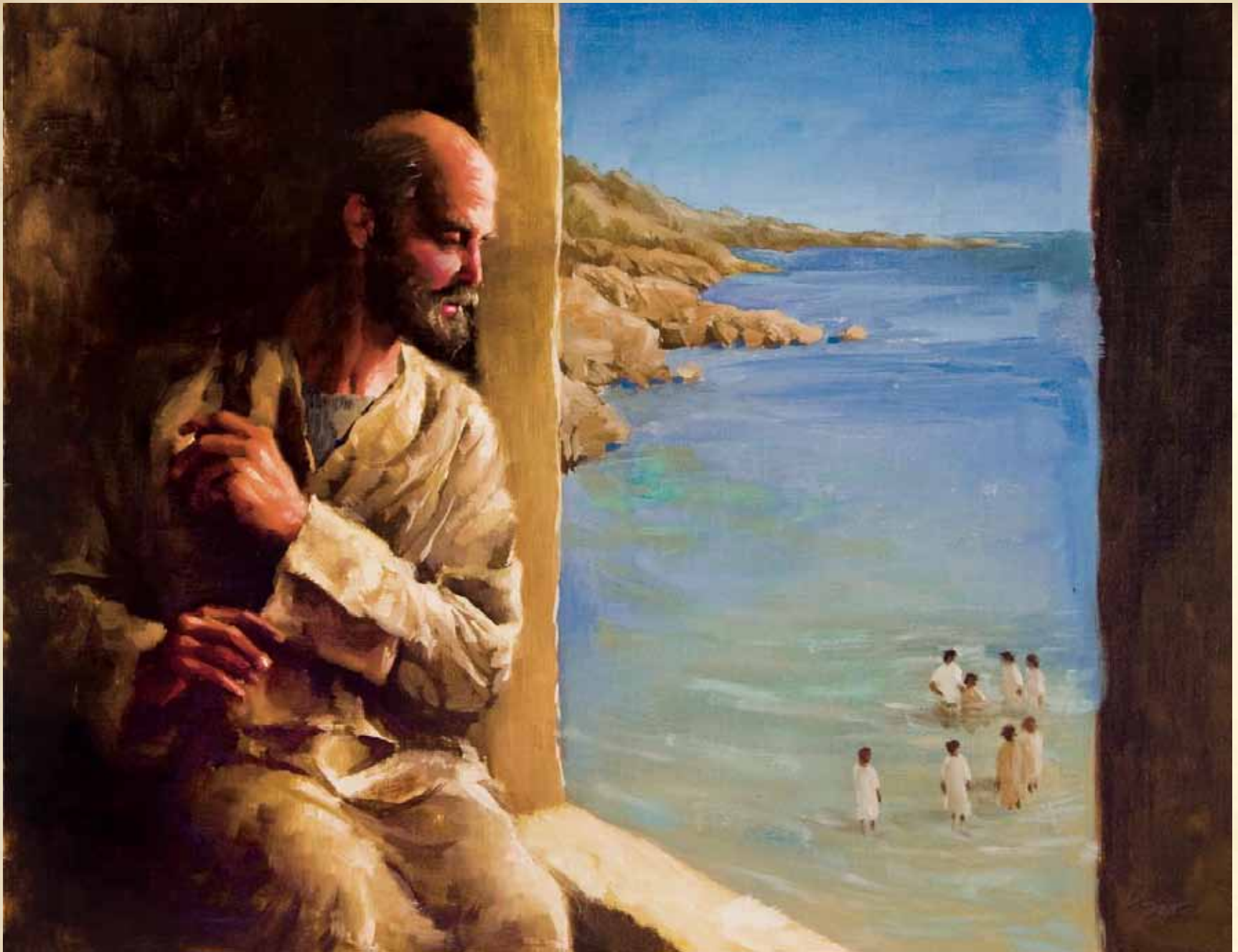


PHOTO BY ALEXANDER Z, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Constantine built this arch after a great victory. It was after this victory that he said he had become a Christian and that God had helped him win.

Some wrote that Alexander first saw young Athanasius from the window of his house, as the boy played with some friends on a beach. Soon, he noticed something strange: Athanasius seemed to be baptizing the others! Worried that the boys might be treating baptism as a game, Alexander called them and asked them many questions. By their answers, he realized that Athanasius had taught his friends all the right things about baptism and the Christian faith.

Impressed by Athanasius's understanding, Alexander decided to take care of his education, making sure that he learned all the important school subjects. He also personally taught him to understand the Bible. When Athanasius was a little older, Alexander made him his helper.



Some wrote that Alexander first saw young Athanasius from the window of his house as the boy played with some friends on a beach.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. F. NUNES



Roman theater in Alexandria, where gladiatorial games and chariot races were held. During the Roman persecutions, Christians were often killed in these open theaters.

Alexandria was a large city and a good place to study. It had some of the best schools and, at one time, the largest library in the world. It was also a rich city with two large harbors, sending goods to other parts of the Roman Empire and other lands like India, China, and Arabia. The church there, however, was facing many problems. A priest named Arius was causing some serious problems. He was teaching some things that Alexander considered very dangerous.

Some things in the Bible can't be understood by our human mind. We can't completely understand how God can be one in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), or how Jesus can be fully God and fully man. Most Christians agree that it is wise to accept these things as a mystery that God will reveal one day. Others try to give explanations, which sometimes cause problems that need to be corrected.

Arius was one of these people. He thought that if Jesus was the Son of God, He had to have a beginning, because all sons have a beginning. He thought that there had to be a time when Jesus did not exist at all, not only as a man but also as God. Because of that, Arius figured, Jesus had to be a creature and could not be the same as God. To Arius, this made more sense and was easier to understand.

Alexander did not believe that this was what the Bible taught. Jesus was born as a man, but, as God, He existed from eternity.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEON BAGAS

### An artist's view of Alexander

*No one knows what Alexander really looked like because there are no pictures of him from this period of history.*

Alexander talked to Arius and waited for him to change, but Arius never did, and his teachings spread quickly. After discussing the problem with other bishops, Alexander finally asked Arius and his closest followers to leave the church in Alexandria. Arius had many friends outside of Egypt who offered him help and protection, so he continued to teach wherever he went. He even put his teachings to music, with catchy songs sung by the common people everywhere. Soon, these teachings spread throughout the Eastern Empire and even to some of the most distant provinces of the Western Roman Empire. Everywhere, people argued about this. It was difficult to come to an agreement because both sides used Bible verses to prove their point.

Emperor Constantine was worried because these disagreements often turned into fights. In the year 325, after he had become emperor of the whole Roman Empire, both in the East and in the West, he called all Christian bishops to a meeting in the town of Nicea (pronounced Nĭ-SEE-ah), in the area that is now called Turkey. It was a strange sight. Until then, many emperors had been enemies of Christianity, but now, for the first time, an emperor led a meeting of Christian leaders, treating them as important guests.



A portion of the ancient walls of Nicea, as seen by a nineteenth-century artist.

These official meetings of bishops were called *councils*. Arius was invited, even though he was not a bishop, and Athanasius accompanied Alexander. About three hundred bishops came to this council from many regions of the empire.

Agreeing on who Jesus really is according to the Bible was very important to these bishops, who had just suffered for their faith in Him during the Great Persecution, so much that some were now lame and blind. Most of them were angry at Arius for his suggestion. After much discussion, study of the Scriptures, and prayer, they finally agreed that Jesus is truly God—eternal, not created, and equal to the Father—and they wrote all this in a document, which all except two signed.

A document that states what a person or a group of people believes is called a *creed*. This document was called the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed that you recite in church is just a little different from this one because it was reworded fifty-six years later at another meeting.