

Athanasius, Atonement and Annihilation

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Introduction

Athanasius sets out his work on the incarnation in several thematic sections. He starts out talking about the state of humanity as God created it. He then moves on to talking about what happened as a result of the fall, and then about why and how God remedied this situation. He then moves on to apologetical arguments, defending the fact that God did make atonement in Christ against some skeptical objections. There is really a series of talks lurking in those subjects that could be put to very good use as an explanation of the Christian faith, but I'm going to pick out just one thread that runs through them: Jesus died for sinners.

On the face of it, it sounds too simple. Why do I need to tell you this? Why, especially, do I need to quote the long dead fourth century Bishop of Alexandria to tell you this? The reason is here: What people say has implications, whether they appreciate those implications or not. When a person says "Jesus died for me," this confession of faith has consequences whether the confessor sees what those consequences are or not. I'm drawing on Athanasius here because he explained so much of the content of why Jesus came and what his death achieved that those consequences begin to appear on the horizon in a way that is appreciated by few contemporary evangelicals, Catholics or Orthodox. Athanasius gave Christianity – *Catholic* Christianity for that matter, very good theological reasons to doubt what so much of what it affirmed – and still affirms – about human nature, the death of Jesus, and the consequences of sin.

Humanity as God intended it

Athanasius begins his talk on the incarnation by talking about humanity, since it was humanity that God would become in the incarnation. He begins where humanity begins, in Genesis. Since in this talk my main interest in Athanasius is what his views imply about human destiny, my main interest in what he says about the creation of humanity is in what he says about human immortality, or lack thereof. God made many creatures, including human beings. Compared to the other creatures, “Man,” Athanasius wrote, was “created above the rest, but incapable of independent perseverance” (from the heading of chapter 3).

Athanasius explains that God gave mankind a gift, creating him in God’s image and “giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflexion of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise” (3:3).

In Athanasius’ vocabulary, being perfectly human, as humanity was created, was to reflect the image of the true Word, that is, Jesus, who would be the perfect man. As long as humanity maintained the reflection of that perfection, they would live forever in blessedness, because God would continue to give them life. From time to time we hear theologians offering views on whether or not, before the fall, humanity is depicted in Scripture as *immortal*, with the potential to lose that immortality, or *mortal*, with the possibility of gaining immortality if they passed the test that God set before them. Rather than speaking about humanity as being either mortal or immortal, Athanasius presents humanity as being contingent or dependent on the reflection of the image of God. Notice – it is not that humanity’s *immortality* was contingent on maintaining this reflection (although this is true as a matter of consequence). Humanity itself is contingent on this fact. This becomes all the more clear when Athanasius moves on to talk about the fall of humanity, noting there that humanity does not merely lose immortality, but it loses humanity itself.

The Fall and Death

Athanasius narrates for us the now familiar story of the fall of humanity. What exactly did God warn Adam about?

“He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption” (3:4).

Death was ours by nature, Athanasius wrote. Humanity was created capable of dying, having a nature that could not endure forever, able to pursue incorruption by keeping the law that God set before them, but also able to “turn back” to the only thing that their own resources could ultimately give them: nothing: Death and corruption, whence they came. Reflecting on God’s sentence upon Adam, “You shall surely die,” or more literally, “dying you shall die,” Athanasius again talks about man never escaping the state he was in, but abiding in it:

But by ‘dying ye shall die,’ what else could be meant than not dying merely, but also abiding forever in the corruption of death” (3:5)?

I’m fairly confident that from time to time you’ve heard pastors or theologians commenting on God’s sentence “you shall surely die.” In all likelihood, you will have heard people talking about what Adam did not drop dead on that very day, and the answer is often given that Adam entered into a state of *spiritual* death on that very day. For this reason, we are sometimes told, verses like Romans 3:23, “the wages of sin is death,” refer to something far more dreadful than mere dying, but rather to separation – and ultimately eternal separation – from God.

In reply to this outlook, I offer the following antidote from Athanasius, in what he said next about the consequences of the fall:

For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time. For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption (4:4-5).

Whether Athanasius himself countenanced the thought of such a thing as “spiritual death,” he will have none of it here in his work of the incarnation. Athanasius closes the door to any such interpretation of his own comments about death. We have already seen his claim that when death came through sin, human beings began, not to enter a new state of perpetual accursedness and misery (although there is no doubt that the state into which humanity entered was accursed and miserable), but to actually “turn back” into their natural state, that is, to return to a former state. That state is a state of “what is not,” wherein people “disintegrate” and “abide in death and corruption.” They lose not merely happiness, or embodiment, but they become “bereft of being” itself. Let’s put it bluntly – they eventually cease to exist.

In the contemporary world of popular evangelical theology, Athanasius is already in serious trouble. In fact, given Athanasius’ own view of human nature, he is, in my view, in considerable tension with himself. These statements about the fall appear to be crystal clear. God created humanity out of nothing. God is the source of their being, and when humanity rejects God, it loses its very being. The reasoning is simple and uncontrived. But in an unrelated work *Against the Heathen*, Athanasius’ concern is to lay out the Church’s teaching on the soul. There he claims quite dogmatically that “The soul is immortal.” He seeks to prove this claim by telling the reader that the soul is distinct from the body, that the soul is the source of the body’s motion, and that the soul goes beyond the body in imagination and thought. Therefore, so we are supposed to conclude, it is immortal.¹ Of course, one who is not already some sort of dualist, favorably disposed to the idea of soul’s immortality, is unlikely to grant that these three claims are true at all – not at least if Athanasius meant what most dualists of his time meant when they use the word “soul.”

¹ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, Part 2, paragraph 33.

There is a parallel between Athanasius' argument here and his argument in the Incarnation. In the incarnation, he argues in effect that *God* is separate from creation, He is the source of creation's vitality or movement, and that God surpasses creation in creative power. Therefore when creation – us – separates itself from God, it dies. When discussing the immortality of the soul, then, he treats the soul like God and the body like creation. He believed, of course, that the soul was part of creation. This should have given him pause, calling to mind his argument from the Incarnation, and holding back from his tenacious argument for the soul's immortality. I have no interest in trying to solve the problem for Athanasius, or holding him up as a paradigm of consistency. If there is a lesson here, it is that we are on much surer footing when we spell out the obvious truths of the Gospel of Christ than we are when we are trying to defend a complicated framework of theology because it is what the Church teaches.

Why did God become man?

Athanasius next turns to speak more directly about the Incarnation. But before doing so, he justifies his lengthy discussion of humanity and the fall.

You are wondering, perhaps, for what possible reason, having proposed to speak of the Incarnation of the Word, we are at present treating of the origin of mankind. But this, too, properly belongs to the aim of our treatise. For in speaking of the appearance of the Savior amongst us, we must needs speak also of the origin of men, that you may know that the reason of His coming down was because of us, and that our transgression²⁰³ called forth the loving-kindness of the Word, that the Lord should both make haste to help us and appear among men (1:1-2).

The fall, says Athanasius, dishonors God. God's character is impugned if he allows His workmanship to remain unredeemed. But in explaining why, Athanasius gets himself into more hot water with contemporary evangelicalism, and again, with himself.

The human race then was wasting, God's image was being effaced, and His work ruined. Either, then, God must forego His spoken word by which man had incurred ruin; or that which had shared in the being of the Word must sink back again into destruction, in which case God's design would be defeated. What then? Was God's goodness to suffer this? But if so, why had

man been made? It would have been weakness, not goodness on God's part. (Heading of Chapter 6)

If God had done nothing to redeem fallen man, then creation itself would have been a mere waste of time, since humanity would have vanished again as though God had not created them. They were sinking, as Athanasius put it, "back again into destruction," the word "back" showing that by "destruction" Athanasius means exactly what today's annihilationists mean when they talk about death and destruction being the consequences of sin. Death is portrayed by Athanasius here not as a transition to a less than desirable state, much less the inheritance of an eternal destiny of conscious separation from God, but rather an undoing of God's creative work, and a return to the prior state of affairs. This is made uncomfortably clear for those with traditional views of human nature and death when Athanasius goes on to elaborate in chapter 6:

Man was perishing; the rational man made in God's image was disappearing, and the handiwork of God was in process of dissolution. For death, as I said above, gained from that time forth a legal hold over us, and it was impossible to evade the law, since it had been laid down by God because of the transgression, and the result was in truth at once monstrous and unseemly. For it were monstrous, firstly, that God, having spoken, should prove false—that, when once He had ordained that man, if he transgressed the commandment, should die the death, after the transgression man should not die, but God's word should be broken. For God would not be true, if, when He had said we should die, man died not. Again, it were unseemly that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption²¹⁴. 5. For it were not worthy of God's goodness that the things He had made should waste away, because of the deceit practiced on men by the devil. Especially it was unseemly to the last degree that God's handicraft among men should be done away, either because of their own carelessness, or because of the deceitfulness of evil spirits.

What would have happened if God had not intervened in the Incarnation? Man would have perished. His creation at the hand of God would have been undone, God's handiwork would be dissolved, and we would turn again into non-existence. It is as though Athanasius is trying to make it as obvious as possible what he thinks about human nature and death. How utterly queer his comments elsewhere on the immortality of the soul appear in light of this apparently unambiguous explanation!

The Incarnation was God's way of undoing this travesty.

And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death He gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father — doing this, moreover, of His loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in

Him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord's body, and had no longer holding-ground against men, his peers), and that, secondly, whereas men had turned toward corruption, He might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of the Resurrection, banishing death from them like straw from the fire. (8:4)

The Word, taught Athanasius, "became incarnate for our sakes, that He might offer Himself to the Father in our stead, and redeem us through His oblation and sacrifice" (Festal letter 10, par. 10). It is sometimes alleged that a penal substitution view of the atonement did not emerge until the time of the Reformation. I beg to differ. Perhaps the Reformation saw an explosion of interest in that idea because of its connection to the doctrine of justification by faith, but the thought is clearly here in Athanasius. Jesus took on the consequences of sin *in my place*.

Here we come to a fork in the road, as it opens up other subjects that can be pursued. Athanasius was a champion of Christian orthodoxy, and of the doctrine of the Trinity in particular – a doctrine I wholeheartedly embrace. But what does it mean for Athanasius, as a devout Trinitarian, to say that sin causes the undoing of humanity in death, and the Jesus, the divine Son of God and second person of the Trinity, became man and suffered the consequences of sin? Was He too undone? Did the Trinity cease to exist when Jesus died, only to have the band reunite when Jesus rose? There is a myriad of issues here. My brief summary is that Jesus did not cease to exist, because He did not see corruption. This was of great importance to the evangelists on the day of Pentecost. He did not see decay, but remained in the tomb until God raised him to life.

But even this is too much for Athanasius. He makes a way out of actually having to say that the Word disappeared or even died, by on the one hand talking about Christ submitting *himself* to death instead of all, which, for humans, meant an undoing of creation and a disappearance back into the nonexistence prior to creation, but on the other hand talking about Christ only taking to himself a human body (which was not co-essential with the divine logos itself) and submitting *that* to death on behalf of all. He says this at times in the work on the Incarnation, and even more explicitly elsewhere, where he says that the body was not really part

of Christ, but rather, Christ was taking and using a body.² In my view, this made Athanasius much too close to the Gnostics – who denied that Christ became flesh at all, since flesh is corrupt, and spirit is good.

But that aside, what does this ad hoc maneuver do to Athanasius' exposition of the incarnation and atonement? He had, in crystal clarity, spelt out that humanity had turned from the source of its very being, and so was returning to nothing again, and that Jesus stood in our place, taking the consequences of our sin in our stead. He became *one of us* to suffer and die as one of us. In the treatise on the incarnation, this is spelt out, from start to finish. It is biblical and consistent. But what now, when we add in this foreign piece of theology about Jesus merely *taking* a human body, allowing it to be nailed to the cross, while Jesus himself suffers *none* of the things described in the work on the incarnation? Jesus does not suffer the destruction that was coming to sinners in our place, but he watches on as a body does the work for him. The consequence is an unmitigated disaster for the atonement – the very *purpose* of the incarnation itself.

On the face of it, a strong dualist might want to defend this view. After all, he might say, the consequence of sin is not the death of the soul – these never die, after all – but only of the body. Therefore Jesus only had to take a body and have it killed, and he has done the job. But the traditionalist who says this has not carefully read Athanasius' work on the incarnation. The consequences of the fall are said to be – not a new state of bodily death while the soul lives, but rather a *return* to the destruction of humanity prior to the creation. Unless Athanasius wants to say that the soul of Adam enjoyed an eternal pre-incarnate life before creation, there just is no dualist reading of the work on the Incarnation. This is why it is vain to appeal to Ecclesiastes 12:7 as a proof text of dualism. “The body shall return to the dust as it was, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.” As in Athanasius, the word is “return.” A reversal, an undoing, not a new mode of life altogether.

Closing Thoughts

² Letter 59, to Epectetus, par. 4, 8.

Let's say for a moment that what Athanasius says about the incarnation and atonement in his book on the Incarnation is correct. I'll say that because I think it's basically true. If it is, then there is only one conclusion we can draw about the consequences of not having one's sin atoned for by the Incarnate Christ. Nobody has stood in our place. Nobody has reunited us to God, the source of life in whom we live and move and have our being, and nobody has drunk the poison that was in our cup. All that Athanasius said about the fall – the reversal and undoing of creation, the dissolution of our being, and the sinking back into destruction, all of these will come to us without remedy. Athanasius did not believe in the final annihilation of the wicked. But he gave himself – and us – every reason to do so.

It would be a shame to leave anyone with the impression that Athanasius' work on the Incarnation was all negative, telling us the bad things that sin does, and that Jesus suffered a horrible death, and that those who reject Christ will die that death themselves. That wasn't the main point of the book – or of the Incarnation itself. Athanasius' work on the Incarnation is a work about redemption. When Jesus came into the world, He did so to do the work of an artist, or rather, as the master copy that the artist used. In Athanasius' words,

A portrait once effaced must be restored from the original. Thus the Son of the Father came to seek, save, and regenerate. No other way was possible. Blinded himself, man could not see to heal. The witness of creation had failed to preserve him, and could not bring him back. The Word alone could do so. But how? Only by revealing Himself as Man.
(From the heading of chapter 14)

In becoming man, Christ taught man to know God. In dying, He died for us. But in rising, He became the first fruits, perfectly bearing the image that we will one day bear. It is appropriate then to finish on a positive note from Athanasius:

For that death is destroyed, and that the Cross is become the victory over it, and that it has no more power but is verily dead, this is no small proof, or rather an evident warrant, that it is despised by all Christ's disciples, and that they all take the aggressive against it and no longer fear it; but by the sign of the Cross and by faith in Christ tread it down as dead. For of old, before the divine sojourn of the Savior took place, even to the saints death was terrible, and all wept for the dead as though they perished. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible; for all who believe in Christ tread it under as nothing, and choose rather to die than to deny their faith in Christ. For they surely know that when they die they are not destroyed, but actually live, and become incorruptible through the Resurrection.

(Chapter 27)

Amen!