

ON THE INCARNATION, Chapter 3 (cont'd)

READING 15A (p. 43). Athanasius shows how God deals with us as a good teacher with his pupils, “coming down to their level and using simple means.” Specifically, the Word “became himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which he, the Word of God, did in the body.” Wow! **READING 15B** (p. 43).

READING 16A (p. 44). In this section, Athanasius brings all this profundity together, explaining how, “when then the minds of men had fallen finally to the level of sensible things, the Word submitted himself to appear in a body, in order that he, as Man, might center their senses on himself, and convince them through his human acts that he himself is not man only but also God, the Word and Wisdom of the true God.” And he goes on to explain why, therefore, he came not simply to die, but also to live – not simply (negatively, as it were) to remove the corruption of sin, but (positively) to restore the image of God in creation and to renew that knowledge of God in us. In short, he came precisely to be visible! **READING 16B** (p. 44).

READING 17 (p. 45). Athanasius now enters into the deepest territory yet, concerning the paradox in all this that “when he moved in his body he did not cease also to direct the universe by his mind and thought.” He explores the relationship of his human-ness (working his unlimited power through the limited instrument of the body) with his continuing divinity, and shows how the divinity was not desecrated by being in the body, but how the body was consecrated by the presence of divinity in it. This is a marvelous, and powerful, conception that protects us from the opposed, but equally wrong, doctrines of both the Gnostics and the Arians (being both heretical reactions against the biblical teaching that the Word (God) became flesh (man) – in the former, the Word was God not truly man, and in the latter, the Word was man but not truly God).

Finally, **READING 18** (p. 46). Thus it is that “from such ordinary acts as being born and taking food, he [Jesus] was recognized as being actually present in the body; but by the extraordinary acts which he did through the body he proved himself to be the Son of God... Invisible in himself, he is known from the works of creation; so also, when his Godhead is veiled in human nature, his bodily acts still declare him to be not man only, but the Power and Word of God.” Amen!

ON THE INCARNATION, Chapter 4

Athanasius begins this chapter by reminding us that “all these things [that we’ve been discussing], the Savior thought fit to do, so that, recognizing his bodily acts as works of God, men who were blind to his presence in creation might regain knowledge of the Father.” And now we turn “consider the end of [Jesus’] earthly life and the nature of his bodily death,” explaining that “this is, indeed, the very centre of our faith.” The great point in this chapter is that Christ is revealed as the Son of God no less by his death than by his other acts. **READING 19A** (p. 48).

Review of the structure of the book so far (see page 3 of this outline). Then, **READING 20A** (p. 48). Read also **READING 20B** (p. 49). In this section, Athanasius writes: “Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord’s body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished.”

READING 21A (p. 50). Athanasius concludes all of this by drawing out the implications for us today: what comfort this is! What good news!

From this point forward, he responds to a series of questions which he anticipates being raised, first, by non-believers, and second, by believers.

First, he notes how some people may say, “If the essential thing was that he should surrender his body to death in place of all, why did he not do so as Man privately, without going to the length of crucifixion? Read **READING 21B** (p. 50).

Second, “Why then did he not prevent death, as he did sickness?” Answer: “To prevent the death would have been to impede the resurrection.”

Third, some might press, even so, “it would have been better for the Lord to have avoided the designs of the Jews against him.” **READING 22** (p. 51).

Fourth, why did he have to die openly? **READING 23** (p. 52).

Fifth, “even granting the necessity of a public death for subsequent belief in the resurrection, it would surely have been better for him to have arranged an honorable death for himself, and so have avoided the ignominy of the cross.” **READING 24** (p. 43)!

Sixth, now Athanasius turns to believers, who question why his death had to be such an accursed one on the cross. And he gives three answers: (a) because it was to be a curse that he died at all (**READING 25A** (p. 54)); (b) because in stretching out his arms he abolished the ancient wall of hostility between Jew and Greek, uniting them in one Body, in him (**READING 20B** (p. 55)); and (c) because in dying in the air he vanquished the Ruler of the Air, the devil (**READING 20A** (p. 43)).

REVIEW OF ON THE INCARNATION SO FAR (chapters 1-4)

First, in discussing these matters of why the incarnation was necessary to secure the redemption and salvation of human beings, Athanasius began by noting how **creation and redemption are inseparably linked** – both are by the Word of God. And he **contrasts** this understanding **with** the prevailing systems of thought from his own day – **Epicureanism** (the notion that the world is a self-originating and contained system); **Gnosticism** (the worldview that emphasizes the divinity of Christ (as of everyone else in their spiritual aspect), while de-emphasizing the humanity of Christ and the value of the physical, material created order); and **Arianism** (the worldview that emphasizes the humanity of Christ, while de-emphasizing his divinity, in order in its view to protect God from so “foolish” or “offensive” a thought as the Incarnation. (These systems are **still with us today, as scientific naturalism, New Age mysticism, and Islam**, respectively.)

In this way, he begins whittling away at certain pagan assumptions even mature Christians carry around with them for years – such as, the deluded convictions of our own permanence and “thickness” and ontological integrity apart from God. Athanasius gets right to the point: **apart from God, we revert rapidly back** to what we were and are apart from the formative integration and sustaining integrity of God’s living Word: **nothing**.

The problem was that we (human beings) had turned away from the face and presence of God, who had alone sustained us in a state of everlasting grace. Athanasius’ argument is that, **away from the light of God’s presence, we revert to the impermanence of nature; hasten back into non-being; and worse**, don’t merely sink from the status and dignity we were designed to enjoy to a more bestial mode of existence, but actually in our fall **sink lower than the animals, embracing in our race to oblivion anti-natural behavior** – i.e., evil.

The **problem** that God faced was, *first*, **the DISAPPEARING of his image from the world**; man, as a consequence of his rebellion was under a decree of death. **What to do?** Given God’s goodness, and his intention in having created us in the first place, he couldn’t let this happen.

Athanasius asks: **why couldn’t he just forgive and forget?** Why couldn’t he just decree a different scenario? In other words, why couldn’t God simply change what he said? He’s God after all, right? The problem with that view is twofold: *first*, it has **an inadequate understanding of the nature of God’s word and its linkage with being** (such that, God’s word is what gives reality its structure; were he simply to reverse it, it would have catastrophic effects in the real world, unmaking it, undoing us); and *second*, **it has an inadequate view of the nature of sin** (such that, it’s not just a naughty thing which we can forget about and move on, but a lethal corruption of God’s created order. Sin is an unmaking of the very order that God’s word created and sustains. And no mere repentance can undo the damage wrought by it.

What then? **A new creation, a re-creation, was needed**, and this through the agency of God’s creation, the Word. **The Word had to come** (a) **to REMOVE THE CORRUPTION** (here, his mission understood in a *negative* sense – though with the gloriously positive implications that as Christ effected the union of immortal the Son of God with human nature, then, given the solidarity of humankind, all are clothed in incorruption in the promise of the resurrection); and (b) **to RESTORE THE IMAGE** (here, that same mission described in the *positive* sense of his restoring the image of God among human beings that their sin had so horribly defaced; Athanasius likens it to posing for a re-painting of a ruined picture).

The *second*, and related **problem** that God faced was the **DEHUMANIZING** of his image-bearer. What had made us fully human – i.e., fully God’s image-bearing agent in creation – was the knowledge of him. God in his grace gave us **three ways of knowing him**, which we can summarize as **Looking** (i.e., looking to the evidence of his handiwork in creation itself); **Listening** (i.e., listening to his prophets, his special messengers); and **Law-keeping** (i.e., keeping the Way of Life, staying along the path of his will). But human beings had neglected all of these, and were now lost. And thus **the Word came** (c) **to RENEW THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD in us**, by coming down to our level, down before our very eyes, that we might see God – his Wisdom and Power revealed in his Son – and know him. Thus, Athanasius explains how **Jesus’ life**, and his powerful works, were intended precisely to the end that we should be restored and renewed. But now in this chapter, he returns to the first matter – that of removing the corruption of our sin, and shows how not just Jesus’ life, but also – and perhaps especially – **Jesus’ death** reveals God for us, removing our corruption. The astonishing truth is that, **in dying, he defeated death**.