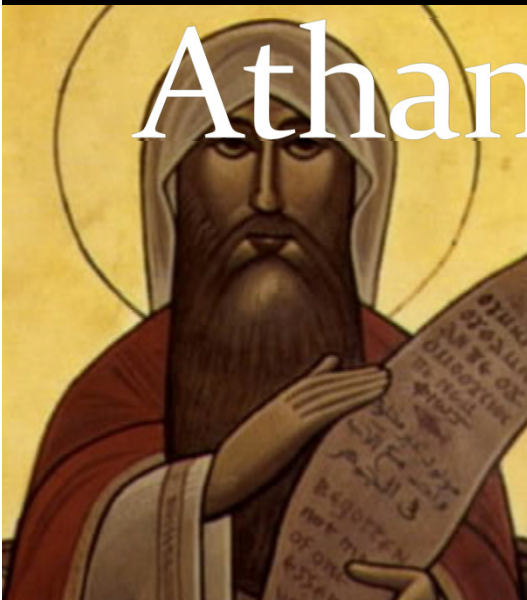


# The Good God and the Healing of Creation According to Athanasius of Alexandria



Mako A. Nagasawa

# Outline

- Introduction: Why Read Athanasius
- Athanasius' Two Volume Work
- Theodicy and Theology
  - God's Character
  - Creation, Fall, and Human Corruption
  - Why Israel? Why Not Just Jump to Jesus?
  - Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature
  - God's Character and Human Destiny
- Athanasius as Evangelist

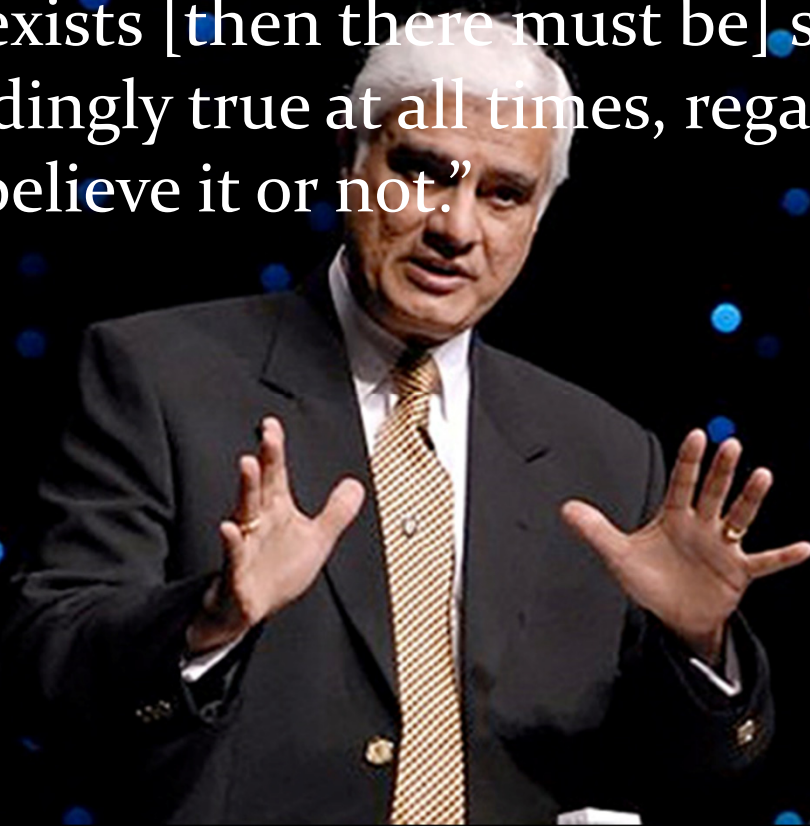
# Introduction: Why Read Athanasius

- Ravi Zacharias, The Problem of Evil



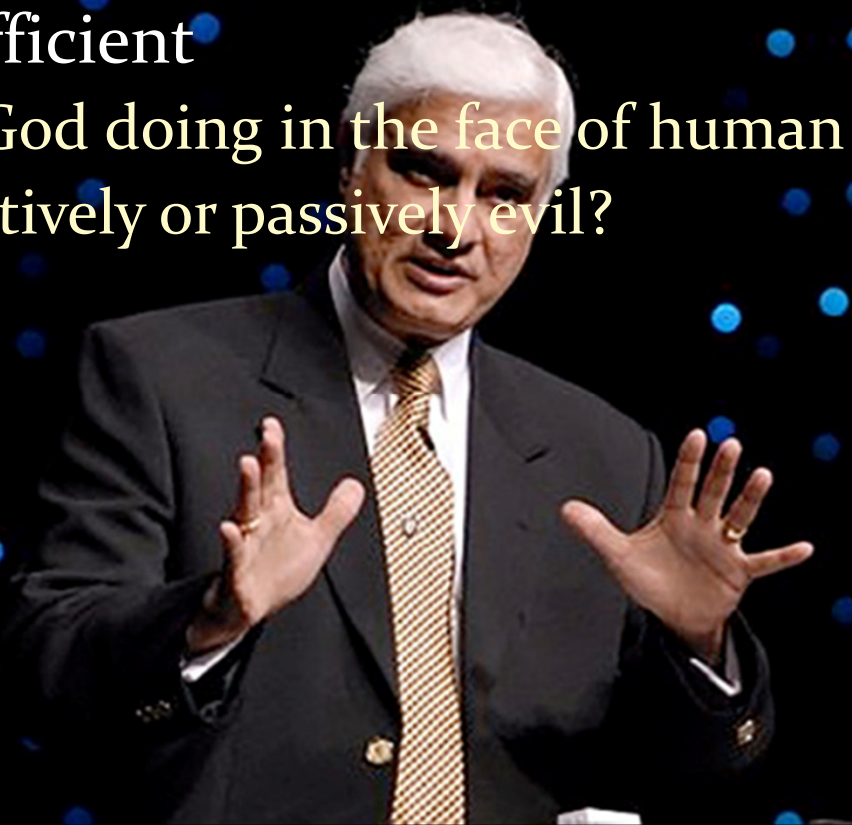
# Introduction: Why Read Athanasius

- “If evil exists, then good exists... If good exists, a moral law exists by which to measure good and evil... If a moral law exists [then there must be] something that is transcendingly true at all times, regardless of whether I believe it or not.”

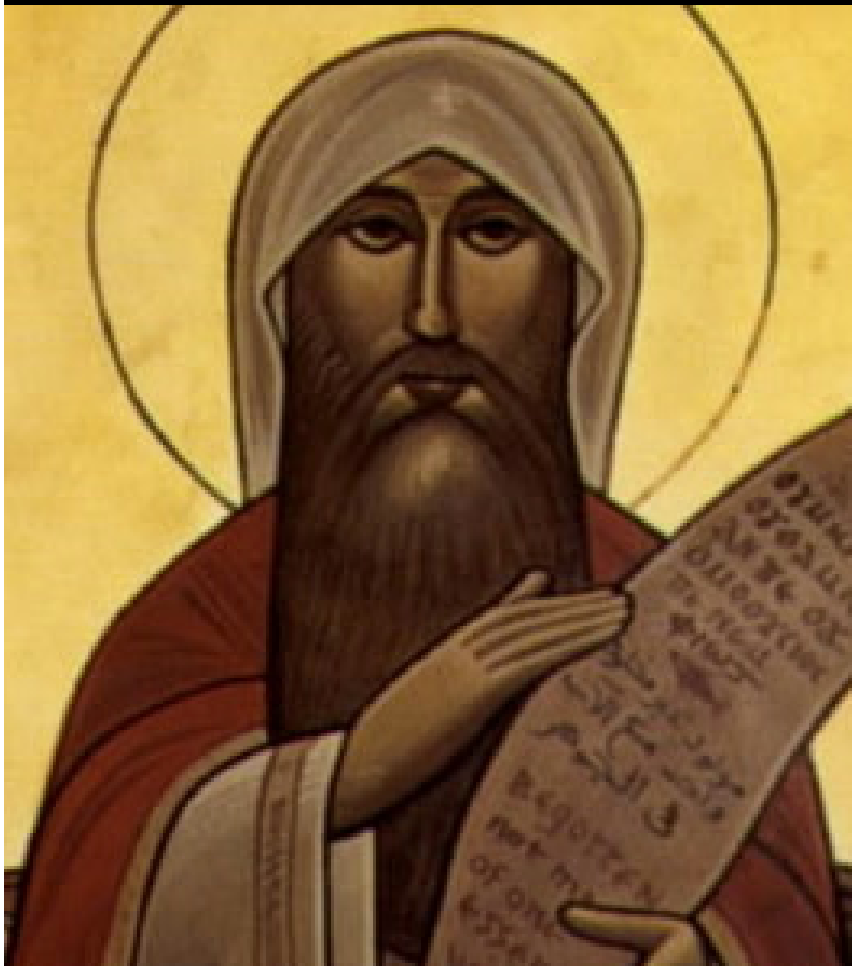


# Introduction: Why Read Athanasius

- Necessary
  - Good and Evil are real moral categories, and distinct
- But not Sufficient
  - What is God doing in the face of human evil?
  - Is God actively or passively evil?



# Athanasius & John Calvin





# Athanasius & John Calvin

- ‘God created the universe so that the full range of His perfections – including wrath and power and judgment and justice – will be displayed. To do that, there is a dark backdrop of the history of redemption called the fall and sin. The acts of grace and the acts of mercy and the experience of salvation shine the more brightly against the backdrop of the fall and of sin.’
  - John Piper, *How Does it Glorify God to Predestine People to Hell?*, March 21, 2013;  
<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-does-it-glorify-god-to-predestine-people-to-hell>

# Athanasius & John Calvin

- Calvin: God does require a hell, because He has two faces
  - ‘[Judgment] day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; *and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate*, who are wicked and disobedient... the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.’
    - *Westminster Confession*, chapter 33, paragraph 2



# Athanasius & John Calvin

- Calvin: The Fall was necessary, and from God
  - ‘God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it.’
    - John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.23.7
  - ‘Nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God....Every action and motion of every creature is so governed by the hidden counsel of God, that nothing can come to pass, but what was ordained by Him....The wills of men are so governed by the will of God, that they are carried on straight to the mark which He has fore-ordained.’
    - John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.3

# Athanasius & John Calvin

- Calvin: The Fall was necessary, and from God
  - ‘But if He did not will it, we could not do it. I admit this... I concede more – that thieves and murderers, and other evil-doers, are instruments of Divine Providence, being employed by the Lord himself to execute the Judgments which he has resolved to inflict. But I deny that this forms any excuse for their misdeeds.’
    - John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.5

# Athanasius & John Calvin

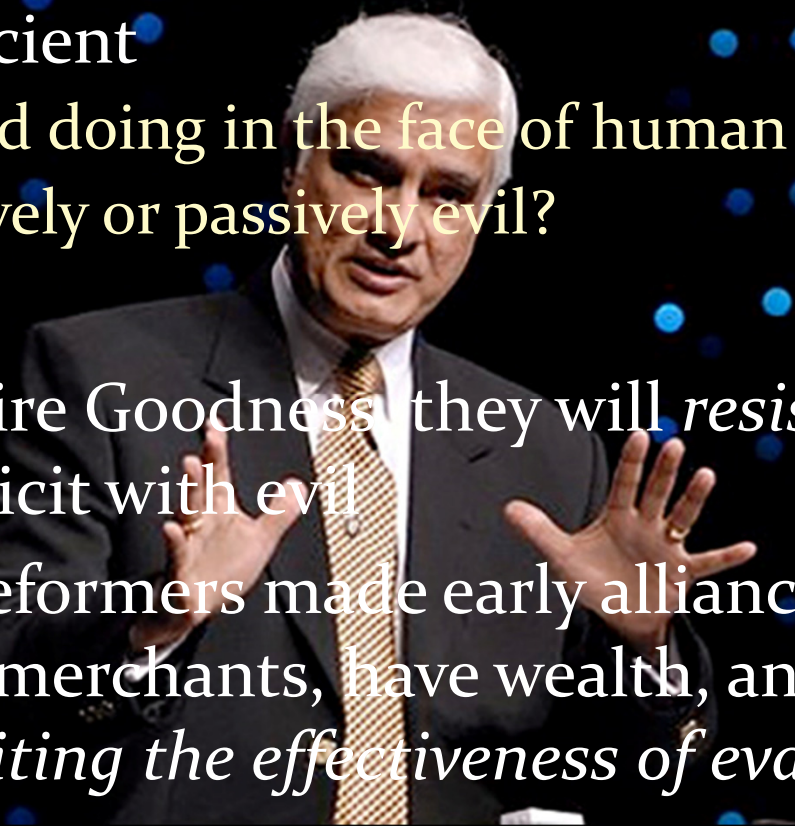
- Calvin: Jesus saves some of us from God's punishment, allows/causes human evil in the rest:
  - 'The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, has fully satisfied the [retributive] justice of His Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, *for those whom the Father has given unto Him.*'
    - *Westminster Confession*, chapter 8, paragraph 5

# Athanasius & John Calvin

- Calvin: Jesus saves some of us from God's punishment, allows/causes human evil in the rest:
  - 'The Reformed position is that Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving *the elect*, and the *elect only*... they are the only ones whom God has determined to save... It should also be noted that the doctrine that Christ died for the purpose of saving all men, logically leads to absolute universalism, that is, to the doctrine that all men are actually saved.'
  - Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology, Part Three: The Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Banner of Truth, 1949), 'The Offices of Christ,' 6.B.2

# Introduction: Why Read Athanasius

- Necessary
  - Good and Evil are real moral categories, and distinct
- But not Sufficient
  - What is God doing in the face of human evil?
  - Is God actively or passively evil?
- If people desire Goodness, they will *resist* a God who is evil or complicit with evil
- Protestant Reformers made early alliances with bankers and merchants, have wealth, and fund ministry, *limiting the effectiveness of evangelism*



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  - Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature
  - God's Character and Human Destiny
- Athanasius as Evangelist

# Athanasius' Two Volume Work

- Timing
  - Georges Florovsky: 317 – 319 AD
    - *Patrology – Patristics: The First Eight Centuries AD*, edited by George Dion. Dragas, volume I, chapter 2; but without substantiation
  - James B. Ernest: 328 – 335 AD
    - *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria*, p.45 – 51 considers much historical data and estimates a date of 328 – 335 AD, specifically arguing against a date earlier than 318 AD because of Athanasius' apparent dependence on Eusebius



# Athanasius' Two Volume Work

- Main Themes
  - *Against the Heathen*
    - “they in their turn would have recognised this man as Saviour of the world, and that the Cross has been not a disaster, but a **healing of Creation**” (1.4)
  - *On the Incarnation*
    - “It is, then, proper for us to begin the treatment of this subject by speaking of the creation of the universe, and of God its Artificer, that so it may be duly perceived that the **renewal of Creation** has been the work of the self-same Word that made it at the beginning” (1.4)

# Athanasius' Two Volume Work

- Irenaeus of Lyons (130 – 202 AD)
  - *That God is Not the Author of Evil* (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.4 – 8)
- Athanasius of Alexandria (298 – 373 AD)
  - *Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation*
- Basil of Caesarea (329 – 379 AD)
  - *Homily 9: God Is Not the Author of Evil*
    - “It has been conjectured that it was delivered shortly after some such public calamity as the destruction of Nicæa in 368” (Philip Schaff, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol.2, Bk.8, p.74)
  - *Hexaemeron, Homily 2.4*

# Athanasius' Two Volume Work

- “The truth of the Church’s theology must be manifest: that evil has not from the beginning been with God or in God, nor has any substantive existence; but that men, in default of the vision of good, began to devise and imagine for themselves what was not, after their own pleasure.” (*Against the Heathen* 7.3)

# Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*

- Ch.1: Introduction
- Ch.2 – 5: Biblical account of creation and fall
- Ch.6: Refutation of the view that evil is a concrete thing
- Ch.7: Refutation of the dualistic view of a good god and an evil god
- Ch.8 – 29: Refutation of idol-worship
- Ch.30 – 47: The way back

# Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*

- Ch.1 – 3: God is good in creation
- Ch.4 – 10: God is good, despite the fall, because the incarnation of the Word heals humanity
- Ch.11 – 16: God is good, because the Word revealed the Father and restores the human mind
- Ch.17 – 32: Questions and answers on the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Word
- Ch.33 – 40: Refutation of the Jews
- Ch.41 – 54: Refutation of the Greeks
- Ch.55 – 57: Conclusion

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# God's Character

- Athanasius obligates himself to explain God's deeds as an expression of His goodness
  - 'For *their deeds must correspond to their natures*, so that at once the actor may be made known by his act, and the action may be ascertainable from his nature. So that just as a man discussing about water and fire, and declaring their action, would not say that water burned and fire cooled, nor, if a man were discoursing about the sun and the earth, would he say the earth gave light, while the sun was sown with herbs and fruits, but if he were to say so would exceed the utmost height of madness, so neither would their writers, and especially the most eminent poet of all, if they really knew that Zeus and the others were gods, invest them with such actions as show them to be not gods, but rather men, and not sober men.' (*Against the Heathen* 16.4)



# God's Character

- 'God is *good* and exceeding noble' (*Against the Heathen* 2.2), 'For God, being *good* and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by Him' (35.1), 'His Word...proceeds in His *goodness* from the Father as from a *good* Fountain' (41.1), 'But the God of all is *good* and exceeding noble by nature, and therefore is kind; for one that is *good* can grudge nothing: for which reason he does not even grudge existence, but desires all to exist, as objects for his loving-kindness' (41.2), 'Because He is *good* He guides and settles the whole Creation by His Word' (41.3), 'Seeing the power of the Word, we receive a knowledge also of a *good* Father' (45.2), 'Being the *good* Offspring of Him that is *good*, and true Son, He is the Father's Power and Wisdom and Word, not being so by participation, nor as if these qualities were imparted to Him from without... but He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father' (46.8).

# God's Character

- 'The *good* Father through Him orders all things' (*On the Incarnation* 1.1), 'what men deride as unseemly, this by His own *goodness* He clothes with seemliness' (1.2), 'He has yet of the loving-kindness and *goodness* of His own Father been manifested to us in a human body for our salvation' (1.3), 'For God is *good*, or rather is essentially the source of *goodness*: nor could one that is *good* be niggardly of anything' (3.3), 'for what is evil is not, but what is *good* is... [and] they derive their being from God who is' (4.5), 'For it were not worthy of God's *goodness* that the things He had made should waste away... what was God in His *goodness* to do? ... For neglect reveals weakness, and not *goodness* on God's part... It was, then, out of the question to leave men to the current of corruption; because this would be unseemly, and unworthy of God's *goodness*' (6.5 – 10)

# God's Character

- 'this great work was peculiarly suited to God's *goodness*... much more did God the Word of the all-*good* Father not neglect the race of men' (10.1), 'inasmuch as He is *good*, He did not leave them destitute of the knowledge of Himself' (11.1), 'being *good*, He gives them a share in His own Image' (11.3), 'God's *goodness* then and loving-kindness being so great' (12.6), 'since it were unworthy of the Divine *Goodness* to overlook so grave a matter' (43.4), 'by His guidance and *goodness*' (43.7).

# God's Character

- 'In general, God's *physis* [nature] is good and surpasses all excellence... It could be argued that *physis* agrees not only with *ousia*, but also with *act*.'
- George Dion. Dragas, *Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: Original Research and New Perspectives*, p.29 emphasis mine

# Creation: Original Blessing

- ‘He made all things out of nothing through His own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ and of all these His earthly creatures He reserved especially mercy for the race of men. Upon them... He bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked – namely the impress of His own image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God even as He does, though in limited degree they might continue for ever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise.’ (*On the Incarnation* 3.3)

# Creation: Human Choice

- ‘But since the will of man could turn either way, God secured this grace that He had given by making it conditional from the first upon two things – namely, a law and a place. He set them in His own paradise, and laid upon them a single prohibition. If they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence, then the life of paradise should be theirs, without sorrow, pain or care, and after it the assurance of immortality in heaven. But if they went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright in beauty, then they would come under the natural law of death and live no longer in paradise, but, dying outside of it, continue in death and in corruption’ (3.4)

# Fall: Possible But Not Required

- Evil is possible because of the superabundance of Good. Human beings can 'disorder' good things (*Against the Heathen* 8.1 – 2). We produce a 'disorder' in our own souls: 'corruption'
  - 'All of which things [evils] are a vice and sin of the soul: neither is there any cause of them at all, but only the rejection of better things.' (*Against the Heathen* 5.2)



# Fall: Human Corruption

- The Fall was self-harm
  - ‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have well been enough; but when transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the image of God’ (*On the Incarnation* 7.4)

# Fall: Why Death and Exile?

- How is God good by imposing death and exile from the garden?
  - ‘The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death...’ (*On the Incarnation* 9.1)

# Why Israel?

- God's Educational Partner
  - 'Man's neglect of the indwelling grace tends to ever increase; and against this further frailty also God made provision by giving them a law, and by sending prophets, men whom they knew. Thus... men can learn directly about higher things from other men... For the law was not given only for the Jews... The law and the prophets were a sacred school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the spiritual life for the whole world' (*On the Incarnation* 12.2, 5)

# Why Israel?

- God's Clinical / Diagnostic Partner
  - 'But once man was in existence, and things that were, not things that were not, **demanded to be healed**, it followed as a matter of course that the Healer and Savior should align Himself with those things that existed already, in order to heal the existing evil. For that reason, therefore, He was made man, and used the body as His human instrument.' (*On the Incarnation* 44.7)
  - The human heart "demanded to be healed": Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21; Lev.26:41; Dt.10:16; 30:6; Ps.51:9 – 10; Pr.20:9; Jer.4:4; 9:25 – 26; 17:1 – 10; 31:31 – 34; Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 36; Mt.15:18 – 20; Mk.7:21 – 23; Rom.2:28 – 29

# Why Israel?

- ‘Thus it was, too, that God formed man at the first, because of His munificence; but chose the patriarchs for the sake of their salvation; and prepared a people beforehand, teaching the headstrong to follow God; and raised up prophets upon earth, **accustoming man to bear His Spirit**, and to hold communion with God: He Himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but granting communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and **sketching out, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those that pleased Him...** Thus, in a variety of ways, He adjusted the human race to an **agreement with salvation.**
- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.14.2

# Why Israel?

- ‘But **the law** coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death’s) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, **a weighty burden** upon man, who had sin in himself, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, **it merely made sin to stand out in relief**, but did not destroy it.’
  - Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7

# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- God's Motivation for Jesus
  - 'He saw the reasonable race, the race of men that, like Himself, expressed the Father's Mind, wasting out of existence, and death reigning over all in corruption. He saw that corruption held us all the closer, because it was the penalty for the Transgression; He saw, too, how unthinkable it would be for the law to be repealed before it was fulfilled. He saw how unseemly it was that the very things of which He Himself was the Artificer should be disappearing. He saw how the surpassing wickedness of men was mounting up against them; He saw also their universal liability to death...



# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- God's Motivation for Jesus
  - '...All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery, rather than that His creatures should perish and the work of His Father for us men come to nought, He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own.... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father...

# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- God's Motivation for Jesus
  - '...This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.' (*On the Incarnation* 8.1 – 4)

# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- Human corruption required a reversal of the corruption in a human
  - ‘The perfect Word of God puts around Him an imperfect body, and is said to be created ‘for the works;’ that, paying the debt in our stead, he might, by Himself, perfect what was wanting to man.’ (*Against the Arians* 2.66)
    - The debt is to be faithful to the Father, in the Spirit, to ‘circumcise the heart’ (Dt.10:16; 30:6)
    - The debt is not to suffer
    - God is not a currency exchanger

# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- The incarnate Word's goal was resurrection
  - 'The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body' (*On the Incarnation* 4.22)
  - 'He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of his resurrection.' (9.1 – 2)
  - 'The Lord was especially concerned for the resurrection of the body which He was set to accomplish... Having effected the blotting out of the corruption' (22.4)

# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- To renew the image of God in human nature (*On the Incarnation* 13); the analogy of the artist re-drawing the portrait, when the subject comes again (14)
- Human beings looked 'downward' to creation. So the Word 'met us half way' by becoming 'an object for the senses' (15)

# Jesus and the Healing of Human Nature

- What about us? We are in process of being cleansed of the corruption of human evil
  - ‘Now, therefore, when we die we no longer do so as men condemned to death, but as those who are **even now in process of rising** we await the general resurrection.’ (*On the Incarnation* 10.5)

# God's Character and Human Destiny

- 'You must know, moreover, that the corruption which had set in was not external to the body but established within it. The need, therefore, was that life should cleave to it in corruption's place, so that... life also might be engendered in it... Stubble is a substance naturally destructible by fire... But suppose that, instead of merely keeping the fire from it somebody soaks the stubble with a quantity of asbestos, the substance which is said to be the antidote to fire. Then the stubble no longer fears the fire, because it has put on that which fire cannot touch, and therefore it is safe...

# God's Character and Human Destiny

- ‘...The body put on the incorporeal Word of God, and therefore fears neither death nor corruption any more, for it is clad with Life as with a garment, and in it corruption is clean done away.’ (*On the Incarnation* 44)
- ‘He assumed humanity that we might become God’ (*On the Incarnation* 54.3) ‘He was made man that we might be made God’



# God's Character and Human Destiny

- 'No longer will He then be judged but rather will Himself be Judge, judging each and all according to their deeds done in the body, whether good or ill. Then for the good is laid up the heavenly kingdom, but for those that practice evil outer darkness and the eternal fire.' (*On the Incarnation* 56.3)
- 'Fire' is continuous with the imagery of purification
  - See Athanasius, *Festal Letter #3* (331 AD)
- Divine 'fire' is always directed at the corruption that people are addicted to
- No one needs to sin, as if God needed them to

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# Athanasius as Evangelist

- The problem of human nature
  - Islam: Qur'an 94
  - “People do evil because of society”
- “The problem of good” and not just “the problem of evil”
  - Hindus/Buddhists: is hope deceptive?
  - Atheist-Agnostics: which God do you reject?

# Athanasius as Evangelist

- Why God Is Good, Despite Human Evil
- Creation
  - God's goodness required human free will to love Him and relationally ascend into perfection
- Corruption
  - The Fall was possible, because of the superabundance of good, but not required
- Clinical Trial in Israel
  - Israel was God's partner to diagnose the human condition and hope for a cure in the Messiah
- Cure in Jesus Christ
  - God's goodness required Him to heal human nature and defeat evil in a loving way (since human free will to love Jesus is still necessary)
- Consummation
  - Hell is not necessary, but is based on human choices to shape our natures