

Module 205: Anselm

Why Did God Become Man? by St Anselm. Translated by Sidney Norton Deane. Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“The satisfaction which every sinner owes to God.”

Module Introduction

The church in Europe spent the first half of the Middle Ages besieged on all sides by pagan tribes and the might of Islam, and it is a miracle that it survived.

But from the start of the second millennium, Christian Europe experienced a huge recovery, converting the last of the tribes, and gaining ground on the Muslims. This made room for a cultural recovery too, a rebirth of learning. New religious movements started, and, for the first time in centuries, major philosophical controversies over religious ideas broke out.

The premier theologian in the new invasion-free Europe was Anselm of Canterbury, the head of the English church, originally a Benedictine monk from north Italy. His most radical, and perhaps most influential, contribution to Christian thought is *Cur Deus Homo?*, or *Why Did God Become Man?*

Why did God become a human being, and die on the cross? To save us from sin and death. But how did it achieve that?

Before Anselm came along the generally accepted explanation was this: the human race, because of its sin, belonged to the Devil, and Jesus died to pay him the ransom. Anselm argued that neither we nor God owed anything to the Devil - our only debt was to God. Christ died in our place because there was no way we could pay the debt ourselves.

Anselm’s theory is highly popular, though not the only one—Abelard, for example, violently disagreed. It is called “Penal substitution” because Christ was substituted in our place and paid our penalty.

Anselm was equally radical in his emphasis on human reason.

You will notice that this writing is unusual in not containing a single Scripture reference. This is not because Anselm looked down on the Bible or mistrusted it; by no means. But he believed that we can discover for ourselves the truths revealed in the Bible (although his whole argument is based on facts revealed in Scripture) if we just think through the issues carefully enough. This is what he tries to do in *Why Did God Become Man?* This way revelation and reason give us a double proof that it was right and necessary for God to become man and to die.

In taking this approach, Anselm changed the world. He is one of those credited with starting scholasticism, a movement which ruled western thought for 500 years. Scholasticism accepts all biblical teaching, but attempts to work out philosophical problems through reason alone. To this viewpoint, some would argue, we can trace the origins of modern thought which accepts only reason and not revelation.

BOOK 1.

11. What it is to sin, and to make satisfaction for sin.

Anselm. We must ask how God gets rid of men's sins, but first what is sin itself means.

Boso. You explain and I will listen.

Anselm. If a man or angel always gave to God what is due to him, he would never sin.

Boso. I cannot deny that.

Anselm. So sin is simply not giving God what we owe.

Boso. What debt do we owe to God?

Anselm. To subject every wish to his will.

Boso. That's perfectly true.

Anselm. No one who pays this debt commits sin. Everyone

who does not pay it does sin. This is the righteousness of the heart, of the will, and it is the sole and complete debt which we owe to God, and which God requires of us. If someone sins, he has to restore what he has taken away, before he can be clear of fault . So then, every one who sins ought to pay back the honor of which he has robbed God. This is the satisfaction which every sinner owes to God.

Boso. This is somewhat alarming, but I cannot make any rational objection to it.

12. Whether it would be proper for God to cancel sins by compassion alone, without any payment of debt.

Anselm. Would it be proper for God to cancel sins by compassion alone, without any payment of the honor taken from him?

Boso. I don't see why not.

Anselm. How would one go about putting away sins in this way? Simply by not punishing? But it is not right to cancel sin without compensation or punishment - if it is not punished, then is it passed by and not dealt with.

Boso. That makes sense.

Anselm. But it is not fitting for God to pass over anything in his kingdom without dealing with it.

Boso. I cannot disagree without the risk of sin.

Anselm. It is therefore not proper for God to pass over sin unpunished.

Boso. That follows.

Anselm. There is also another thing which follows if sin is passed by unpunished, - that with God there will be no

difference between the guilty and the not guilty. That would be inappropriate for God.

Boso. I cannot deny it . But God commands us always to forgive those who sin against us. It seems inconsistent to tell us to do something it's not proper for him to do himself.

Anselm. It is not inconsistent for God to forbid us to do what only he should do. To take revenge belongs to none but the Lord of all....

Boso. You have solved that difficulty, but there's another one too I'd like you to answer. God is so free that he comes under no law or judgment. He is more merciful than anything else the mind can imagine. And nothing is right unless it happens according to his will. This being the case, it seems strange to say that he is totally unwilling or unable to cancel any injury done to him - especially when we are always asking him to forgive the offences we commit against others.

Anselm. What you say of God's liberty and choice and compassion is true; but we should not interpret these things in any way that seems to interfere with his dignity. For there is no liberty except to do what is best, we should call nothing mercy if it is at all improper for God's character.

Moreover, when we say that whatever God wishes is just, that does not mean that if God wished anything improper it would be just, simply because he wished it. If God wishes to lie, that does not mean that it is right to lie, it means rather that he is not God. So, if it is not fitting for God to do anything unjustly, it does not belong to his liberty or compassion or will to let the sinner go unpunished if he does not return to God what he has stolen from him.

Boso. You remove from me every possible objection which I had thought of bringing against you.

20. Satisfaction ought to be proportionate to the guilt, and man is unable to accomplish this himself.

Anselm. You will not, I think, doubt that the satisfaction we owe God must be proportionate to our guilt.

Boso. No, otherwise sin would be exempt from control, which nothing can be in God's kingdom.

Anselm. Tell me, then, what payment do you make God for your sin?

Boso. Repentance, a broken and contrite heart, self-denial, various bodily sufferings, charity and forgiveness to others, and obedience.

Anselm. What do you give to God in all this?

Boso. Surely I honor God .

Anselm. But you are giving God what you would owe him anyway, whether you had ever sinned or not, so this does not pay the debt of sin.

Boso. Truly, I dare not say that all this pays any part of my debt to God.

Anselm. How then do you repay God for your sin?

Boso. If I already owed God myself and all my powers, even before I sinned, I have nothing left to give to him for my sin.

Anselm. What will become of you then? How will you be saved?

Boso. Looking at your arguments, I see no way of escape."

21. How great a burden sin is.

Anselm. Imagine you did not already owe any of those things which you have brought up as possible payment for

your sin. Can doing them make satisfaction for one sin, even such a small one as looking somewhere, against God's will.

Boso. If I didn't hear you question it, I should suppose that a single repentant feeling on my part would blot out this sin.

Anselm. You have not realized how great a burden sin is.

Boso. Show me then.

Anselm. Imagine you found yourself in the sight of God, and someone said to you, "Look over there," but God said, "I do not want you to look." Ask your own heart what there is in all the universe which would make it right for you to look against God's will.

Boso. I can't think of any motive that would make it right.

Anselm. What if the whole universe, except God himself, was going to perish and fall back into nothing if you didn't do this small thing against God's will?

Boso. When I think of the action itself, it seems very slight; but when I view it as contrary to the will of God, I realize there is nothing so grievous, and no loss that would compare with it. I must confess that I ought not to oppose the will of God even to preserve the whole of creation.

Anselm. What if there were more worlds, just as full of beings as this world?

Boso. If there was an infinite number, my reply would be the same.

Anselm. You could not be more right. So, if you did look somewhere against to God's will, what payment you can make for this sin?

Boso. I can only repeat what I said before.

Anselm. That is how terrible our sin is whenever we knowingly oppose the will of God, even in the slightest thing.

Boso. I cannot deny it.

Anselm. Therefore, you can make no satisfaction for your sin, unless you restore something greater than the whole amount of that obligation which should have restrained you from committing the sin.

BOOK II

6. No being except the God-man can make the atonement by which man is saved.

Anselm. Because of his unchangeable goodness, it is necessary for God, having once started work on mankind, to bring that work to completion [despite man's fall into sin].

Boso. I grant it.

Anselm. But God cannot do this unless he is paid the price for man's sin—a price greater than the whole universe apart from God.

Boso. So it appears.

Anselm. Anyone who could give God something of his own that was more valuable than the whole universe would have to be greater than anyone or anything but God.

Boso. I cannot deny it.

Anselm. This means that no one but God can make this satisfaction.

Boso. So it appears.

Anselm. But no one other than man ought to do it, otherwise man does not make satisfaction.

Boso. That's right.

Anselm. So, if, as I showed earlier, the heavenly kingdom must be filled with men, and if this cannot happen unless the satisfaction is made for sin - satisfaction which no one can make but God, and no one ought to make but man - then it is necessary for the God-man to make it.

Boso. Blessed be God! What a great discovery. Go on as you have begun, for I hope that God will assist you.

19. How human salvation follows upon Christ's death.

Anselm. Let us now observe, if we can, how human salvation comes from this.

Boso. This is my heart's desire. I think I understand you, but I want to follow each link of your argument.

Anselm. Well, there is no need to explain how precious the gift was that the Son freely gave.

Boso. That is clear enough already.

Anselm. And you will not say that he does not deserve any reward for freely giving such a great gift to God.

Boso. I see that it is necessary for the Father to reward the Son. Otherwise he is either unjust in not wishing to do it, or weak in not being able to do it; but neither of these things can be attributed to God.

Anselm. To reward someone you must either give him something he does not have, or else overlook some claim you have upon him. But everything the Father had was already the Son's, and the Son owed the Father nothing. How do you reward the one who has everything?

Boso. The reward is necessary, but it appears impossible.

Anselm. But if no reward is given to anyone, then it would be almost as if the Son had done his great work in vain. It cannot be given to the Son, so it must be given to someone else.

Boso. Yes, it must.

Discussion Starters:

How would you sum up Anselm's explanations of why God became man and why he died?

What is sin, according to Anselm? Is this a helpful way of looking at it? Is this the only definition? Paul defines sin as whatever is not of faith. Do the two definitions agree? Do they overlap? Is one included as part of the other?

"But God commands us always to forgive those who sin against us. It seems inconsistent to tell us to do something it's not proper for him to do himself." How does Anselm handle this objection. Is his answer satisfactory?

"Surely God is free to forgive whom he will, without demanding innocent blood first." How would Anselm answer this? Why can God not forgive sin by simply overlooking it? Do you think Anselm has this right?

Anselm says that no one can put right what has gone wrong unless that person is both divine and human. Why not? Does this argument work?

How exactly does the death of Christ put people right with God?

One argument against penal substitution is that if what Christ's death achieved was to pay the debt that humanity owed God, then we are all off the hook, all saved no matter what we do. Is this a fair point?

Anselm lived in a "feudal" society, a social structure based on everyone's obligations and duties to those above them, and he is criticized for seeing the atonement too much in these terms - as if God were a medieval lord whose sense of "honor" is hurt by our failing to respect

and obey him. Do you think this is fair? Is it possible to put it another way that makes more sense to people in a modern democratic society?

Look closely at the last three paragraphs. Does Anselm's discussion of rewards make sense? Did the Son owe the father obedience? Can you think of anything at all, given the fundamental character of God, that the members of the Trinity might "owe" to each other?

Bible Verses

Isaiah 53:4-6

Matthew 20:25-28

Romans 3:21-26

Colossians 2:13-15

1 John 4:7-17

1 Peter 1:18-21; 3:18-22