

Anselm of Canterbury

Proslogion (Preface; chapters 1-5)

from *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*,

trans. Benedicta Ward

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Proslogion

Preface

At the pressing entreaties of some of my brethren I published a short work as an example of meditation on the meaning of faith, from the point of view of someone who, by silent reasoning in his own mind, inquires into things about which he is ignorant. When I reflected that this consisted in a connected chain of many arguments, I began to ask myself if it would be possible to find one single argument, needing no other proof than itself, to prove that God really exists, that he is the highest good, needing nothing, that it is he whom all things need for their being and well-being, and to prove whatever else we believe about the nature of God. I turned this over in my mind often and carefully; sometimes it seemed to me that what I was seeking was almost within my grasp; sometimes it eluded the keenness of my thought completely; so at last in desperation I was going to give up looking for something that it was impossible to find. But when I wanted to put the idea entirely out of my mind, lest it occupy me in vain and so keep out other ideas in which I could make some progress, then it began to force itself upon me with increasing urgency, however much I refused and resisted it. So one day, when I was tired out with resisting its importunity, that which I had despaired of finding came to me, in the conflict of my thoughts, and I welcomed eagerly the very thought which I had been so anxious to reject.

It seemed to me that this thing which had given me such joy to discover would, if it were written down, give pleasure to any who might read it. So I have written the following short work, dealing with this matter and with several others, from the point of view of someone trying to raise his mind to the contemplation of God, and seeking to understand what he believes. It does not seem to me that either this work or the one I mentioned before

Proslogion

deserves to be called a book or to bear the name of its author; but I do not think they should be distributed without some sort of title, which might make those into whose hands they come read them, so I have given them these titles: the first, 'An example of Meditation on the Meaning of Faith'; and the second, 'Faith in Search of Understanding'.

Under these titles they have both already been transcribed by several people, and many of them (above all the reverend archbishop of Lyons, Hugh, apostolic delegate in Gaul, who has commanded this by his apostolic authority) have urged me to put my name on them. For the sake of greater convenience I have called the first book *Monologion*, that is, a soliloquy; and the other *Proslogion*, that is, a colloquy.

Chapter 1

In which the mind is aroused to the contemplation of God

Come now, little man,
turn aside for a while from your daily employment,
escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts.

Put aside your weighty cares,
let your burdensome distractions wait,
free yourself awhile for God
and rest awhile in him.

Enter the inner chamber of your soul,
shut out everything except God
and that which can help you in seeking him,
and when you have shut the door, seek him.

Now, my whole heart, say to God,

'I seek your face,
Lord, it is your face I seek.'

O Lord my God,
teach my heart where and how to seek you,

Prayers and Meditations

where and how to find you.
Lord, if you are not here but absent,
where shall I seek you?
But you are everywhere, so you must be here, 20
why then do I not seek you?
Surely you dwell in light inaccessible –
where is it? and how can I
have access to light which is inaccessible?
Who will lead me and take me into it 25
so that I may see you there?
By what signs, under what forms, shall I seek you?
I have never seen you, O Lord my God,
I have never seen your face.
Most High Lord, 30
what shall an exile do
who is as far away from you as this?
What shall your servant do,
eager for your love, cast off far from your face?
He longs to see you, 35
but your countenance is too far away.
He wants to have access to you,
but your dwelling is inaccessible.
He longs to find you,
but he does not know where you are. 40
He loves to seek you,
but he does not know your face.
Lord, you are my Lord and my God,
and I have never seen you.
You have created and re-created me, 45
all the good I have comes from you,
and still I do not know you.
I was created to see you,
and I have not yet accomplished that for which I was made.

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Proslogion

How wretched is the fate of man 50
when he has lost that for which he was created.
How hard and cruel was the Fall.
What has man lost, and what has he found?
What has he left, and what is left to him?
He has lost blessedness for which he was made 55
and he has found wretchedness for which he was not made.
He had left that without which there is no happiness,
and he has got that which is nothing but misery.
Once man did eat angels' food,
and now he hungers for it; 60
now he eats the bread of sorrow,
which then he knew nothing of.
Ah, grief common to all men,
lamentation of all the sons of Adam.
Adam was so full he belched, we are so hungry we sigh; 65
he had abundance, and we go begging.
He held what he had in happiness and left it in misery;
we are unhappy in our wants and miserable in our desires,
and ah, how empty we remain.
Why did he not keep for us that which he possessed so easily, 70
and we lack despite such labour?
Why did he shut out our light
and surround us with darkness?
Why did he take away our life and give us the hurt of death?
From whence have we wretched men been pushed down, 75
to what place are we being pushed on?
From what position have we been cast down,
where are we being buried?
From our homeland into exile,
from the vision of God into our own blindness, 80
from the deathless state in which we rejoiced
into the bitterness of a death to be shuddered at.
Wretched exchange, so great a good for so much evil.

Prayers and Meditations

A grievous loss, a grievous sorrow,
the whole thing is grievous. 85

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Alas, I am indeed wretched,
one of those wretched sons of Eve,
separated from God!

What have I begun, and what accomplished?
Where was I going and where have I got to? 90
To what did I reach out, for what do I long?

I sought after goodness, and lo, here is turmoil;
I was going towards God, and I was my own impediment.

I sought for peace within myself,
and in the depths of my heart I found trouble and sorrow. 95

I wanted to laugh for the joy of my heart,
and the pain of my heart made me groan.
It was gladness I was hoping for,
but sighs came thick and fast.

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O Lord, how long? 100

How long, Lord, will you turn your face from us?
When will you look upon us and hear us?
When will you enlighten our eyes and show us your face?

When will you give yourself to us again?
Look upon us, Lord, and hear us, 105
enlighten us and show yourself to us.

Give yourself to us again that it may be well with us,
for without you it is ill with us.

Have mercy on us,
as we strive and labour to come to you, 110
for without you we can do nothing well.

You have invited us to cry out, 'Help us':

Proslogion

I pray you, Lord, let me not sigh without hope,
but hope and breathe again. 115

Let not my heart become bitter because of its desolation,
but sweeten it with your consolation.

When I was hungry I began to seek you, Lord;
do not let me go hungry away.

I came to you famished;
do not let me go from you unfed. 120

Poor, I have come to one who is rich,
miserable, I have come to one who is merciful;

do not let me return empty and despised.
If before I eat I sigh,

after my sighs give me to eat. 125

Lord, I am so bent I can only look downwards,
raise me, that I may look upwards.

My iniquities have gone over my head,
they cover me and weigh me down like a heavy burden.

Take this weight, this covering, from me, 130
lest the pit close its mouth over me.

Let me discern your light,
whether from afar or from the depths.

Teach me to seek you,
and as I seek you, show yourself to me, 135

for I cannot seek you unless you show me how,
and I will never find you

unless you show yourself to me.
Let me seek you by desiring you, 140

and desire you by seeking you;
let me find you by loving you,
and love you in finding you.

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I confess, Lord, with thanksgiving,
that you have made me in your image,
so that I can remember you, think of you, and love you. 145

Prayers and Meditations

But that image is so worn and blotted out by faults,
so darkened by the smoke of sin,
that it cannot do that for which it was made,
unless you renew and refashion it.
Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height, 150
for my understanding is in no way equal to that,
but I do desire to understand a little of your truth
which my heart already believes and loves.
I do not seek to understand so that I may believe,
but I believe so that I may understand; 155
and what is more,
I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand.

Chapter 2
That God really exists

Now, Lord, since it is you who gives understanding to faith,
grant me to understand as well as you think fit, that you exist as
we believe, and that you are what we believe you to be. We 160
believe that you are that thing than which nothing greater can be
thought. Or is there nothing of that kind in existence, since 'the
fool has said in his heart, there is no God'? But when the fool
hears me use this phrase, 'something than which nothing greater
can be thought', he understands what he hears; and what he 165
understands is in his understanding, even if he does not under-
stand that it exists. For it is one thing to have something in the
understanding, but quite another to understand that it actually
exists. It is like a painter who, when he thinks out beforehand
what he is going to create, has it in his understanding, but he does 170
not yet understand it as actually existing because he has not yet
painted it. But when he has painted it, he both has it in his
understanding and actually has it, because he has created it. So
the fool has to agree that the concept of something than which

Proslogion

nothing greater can be thought exists in his understanding, since 175
he understood what he heard and whatever is understood is in
the understanding. And certainly that than which nothing
greater can be thought cannot exist only in the understanding.
For if it exists only in the understanding, it is possible to think of
it existing also in reality, and that is greater. If that than which 180
nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding,
alone, then this thing than which nothing greater can be thought
is something than which a greater can be thought. And this is
clearly impossible. Therefore there can be no doubt at all that
something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in 185
the understanding and in reality.

Chapter 3
That which it is not possible to think of as not existing

This is so truly, that it is not possible to think of it not existing.
For it is possible to think of something existing which it is not
possible to think of as not existing, and that is greater than some-
thing that can be thought not to exist. If that than which nothing 190
greater can be thought, can be thought of as not existing, then
that than which nothing greater can be thought is not the same
as that than which nothing greater can be thought. And that
simply will not do. Something than which nothing greater can be
thought so truly exists that it is not possible to think of it as not 195
existing.

This being is yourself, our Lord and God. Lord my God, you
so truly are, that it is not possible to think of you as not existing.
And rightly so. For if someone's mind could think of something
better than you, the creature would rise higher than its creator 200
and would judge its creator; which is clearly absurd. For what-
ever exists except you alone can be thought of as not existing.
Therefore you alone of all most truly are, and you exist most fully

Prayers and Meditations

of all things. For nothing else is as true as that, and therefore it has *less* existence. So why does the fool say in his heart, 'there is no God', when it is perfectly clear to the reasoning mind that you exist most fully of all? Why, except that he is indeed stupid and a fool?

Chapter 4

That what the fool said in his heart is something that it is not possible to think

Now how has he 'said in his heart' what it is not possible to think; for how could he avoid thinking that which he 'said in his heart', for to say in one's heart is to think. But if he really did, or rather because he really did, both think, because he said in his heart, and not say in his heart, because he was not able to think, then there is not only one way of saying in one's heart and thinking. For in a way one thinks a thing when one thinks the word that signifies the thing; but one thinks it in another way when the thing itself is understood. So in one way it is possible to entertain the concept that God does not exist, but not in the other way. For no one who truly understands that which God is, can think that God does not exist, though he may say those words in his heart, either without any, or with a special, meaning. For God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Whoever truly understands this, understands that he is of such a kind of existence that he cannot be thought not to exist. So whoever understands this to be the nature of God, cannot think of him as not existing.

Thank you, good Lord, thank you, for it was by your gift that I first believed, and now by your illumination I understand; if I did not want to believe that you existed, still I should not be able not to understand it.

Proslogion

Chapter 5

God is whatever it is better to be than not to be; he exists in himself alone; and he creates everything else out of nothing

What are you, then, Lord God, you than whom nothing greater can be thought? What are you but that which exists alone over all things, and has made everything else out of nothing? For whatever is not that, is something less than can be thought; but this cannot be thought about you. Then what good can be lacking to the highest good, through whom all other good exists? So you are just, true, blessed, and whatever it is better to be than not to be. For it is better to be just than unjust, blessed than not blessed.

Chapter 6

How he can be perceived, though he is not a body

Indeed it is better to be capable of perception, omnipotent, merciful, and impassible, than not to be so; but how are you able to perceive if you are not a body, how are you omnipotent if you cannot do all things, and how can you be compassionate and beyond passion at the same time? For if only that which relates to the body can perceive things, since the senses are in the body and concerned with it, how can he perceive, when he is not a body but the highest spirit, which is better than any body?

But if to perceive is nothing else but to know, or related to knowing, or if one perceives by knowing according to the appropriate sense, for instance, colours by seeing, tastes by tasting – it is not inappropriate to say that whatever in some way is perceived, is also in some way known. Thus, Lord, although you do not have a body, you truly perceive in the highest way, for you know all things supremely, though not through the bodily senses like an animal.