



On Sin and the Need for Redemption

Anselm of Canterbury

CHAPTER 21

How great a burden sin is.

Anselm. Suppose that you did not owe any of those things which you have brought up as possible payment for your sin, let us inquire whether they can satisfy for a sin so small as one look contrary to the will of God.

Boso. Did I not hear you question the thing, I should suppose that a single repentant feeling on my part would blot out this sin.

Anselm. You have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin.

Boso. Show it me then.

Anselm. If you should find yourself in the sight of God, and one said to you: "Look thither;" and God, on the other hand, should say: "It is not my will that you should look;" ask your own heart what there is in all existing things which would make it right for you to give that look contrary to the will of God.

Boso. I can find no motive which would make it right; unless, indeed I am so situated as to make it necessary for me either to do this, or some greater sin.

Anselm. Put away all such necessity, and ask with regard to this sin only whether you can do it even for your own salvation.

Boso. I see plainly that I cannot.

Anselm. Not to detain you too long; what if it were necessary either that the whole universe, except God himself, should perish and fall back into nothing, or else that you should do so small a thing against the will of God?

Boso. When I consider the action itself, it appears very slight; but when I view it as contrary to the will of God, I know of nothing so grievous, and of no loss that will compare with it; but sometimes we oppose another's will without blame in order to preserve his property, so that afterwards he is glad that we opposed him.

Anselm. This is in the case of man, who often does not know what is useful for him, or cannot make up his loss; but God is in want of nothing, and, should all things perish, can restore them as easily as he created them.

Boso. I must confess that I ought not to oppose the will of God even to preserve the whole creation.

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

Boso. Were they increased to an infinite extent, and held before me in like manner, my reply would be the same.

Anselm. You cannot answer more correctly, but consider, also, should it happen that you gave the look contrary to God—s will, what payment you can make for this sin?

Boso. I can only repeat what I said before.

Anselm. So heinous is our sin whenever we knowingly oppose the will of God even in the slightest thing; since we are always in his sight, and he always enjoins it upon us not to sin.

Boso. I cannot deny it.

Anselm. Therefore you make no satisfaction unless you restore something greater than the amount of that obligation, which should restrain you from committing the sin.

Boso. Reason seems to demand this, and to make the contrary wholly impossible.

Anselm. Even God cannot raise to happiness any being bound at all by the debt of sin, because He ought not to.

Boso. This decision is most weighty.

Anselm. Listen to an additional reason which makes it no less difficult for man to be reconciled to God.

Boso. This alone would drive me to despair, were it not for the consolation of faith.

Anselm. But listen.

Boso. Say on.

CHAPTER 22

What contempt man brought upon God, when he allowed himself to be conquered by the devil; for which he can make no satisfaction.

Anselm. Man being made holy was placed in paradise, as it were in the place of God, between God and the devil, to conquer the devil by not yielding to his temptation, and so to vindicate the honor of God and put the devil to shame, because that man, though weaker and dwelling upon earth, should not sin though tempted by the devil, while the devil, though stronger and in heaven, sinned without any to tempt him. And when man could have easily effected this, he, without compulsion and of his own accord, allowed himself to be brought over to the will of the devil, contrary to the will and honor of God.

Boso. To what would you bring me?

Anselm. Decide for yourself if it be not contrary to the honor of God for man to be reconciled to Him, with this calumnious reproach still heaped upon God; unless man first shall have honored God by overcoming the devil, as he dishonored him in yielding to the devil. Now the victory ought to be of this kind, that, as in strength and immortal vigor, he freely yielded to the devil to sin, and on this account justly incurred the penalty of death; so, in his weakness and mortality, which he had brought upon himself, he should conquer the devil by the pain of death, while wholly avoiding sin. But this cannot be done, so long as from the deadly effect of the first transgression, man is conceived and born in sin.

Boso. Again I say that the thing is impossible, and reason approves what you say.

Anselm. Let me mention one thing more, without which man's reconciliation cannot be justly effected, and the impossibility is the same.

Boso. You have already presented so many obligations which we ought to fulfil, that nothing which you can add will alarm me more.

Anselm. Yet listen

Boso. I will.

CHAPTER 23

What man took from God by his sin, which he has no power to repay.

Anselm. What did man take from God, when he allowed himself to be overcome by the devil?

Boso. Go on to mention, as you have begun, the evil things which can be added to those already shown for I am ignorant of them.

Anselm. Did not man take from God whatever He had purposed to do for human nature?

Boso. There is no denying that.

Anselm. Listen to the voice of strict justice; and judge according to that whether man makes to God a real satisfaction for his sin, unless, by overcoming the devil, man restore to God what he took from God in allowing himself to be conquered by the devil; so that, as by this conquest over man the devil took what belonged to God, and God was the loser, so in man's victory the devil may be despoiled, and God recover his right.

Boso. Surely nothing can be more exactly or justly conceived.

Anselm. Think you that supreme justice can violate this justice?

Boso. I dare not think it.

Anselm. Therefore man cannot and ought not by any means to receive from God what God designed to give him, unless he return to God everything which he took from him; so that,

as by man God suffered loss, by man, also, He might recover His loss. But this cannot be effected except in this way: that, as in the fall of man all human nature was corrupted, and, as it were, tainted with sin, and God will not choose one of such a race to fill up the number in his heavenly kingdom; so, by man's victory, as many men may be justified from sin as are needed to complete the number which man was made to fill. But a sinful man can by no means do this, for a sinner cannot justify a sinner.

Boso. There is nothing more just or necessary; but, from all these things, the compassion of God and the hope of man seems to fail, as far as regards that happiness for which man was made.

Anselm. Yet wait a little.

Boso. Have you anything further?

CHAPTER 24

How, as long as man does not restore what he owes God, he cannot be happy, nor is he excused by want of power.

Anselm. If a man is called unjust who does not pay his fellow-man a debt, much more is he unjust who does not restore what he owes God.

Boso. If he can pay and yet does not, he is certainly unjust. But if he be not able, wherein is he unjust?

Anselm. Indeed, if the origin of his inability were not in himself, there might be some excuse for him. But if in this very impotence lies the fault, as it does not lessen the sin, neither does it excuse him from paying what is due. Suppose one should assign his slave a certain piece of work, and should command him not to throw himself into a ditch, which he points out to him and from which he could not extricate himself; and suppose that the slave, despising his master's command and warning, throws himself into the ditch before pointed out, so as to be utterly unable to accomplish the work assigned; think you that his inability will at all excuse him for not doing his appointed work?

Boso. By no means, but will rather increase his crime, since he brought his inability upon himself. For doubly hath he sinned, in not doing what he was commanded to do and in doing what he was forewarned not to do.

Anselm. Just so inexcusable is man, who has voluntarily brought upon himself a debt which he cannot pay, and by his own fault disabled himself, so that he can neither escape his previous obligation not to sin, nor pay the debt which he has incurred by sin. For his very inability is guilt, because he ought not to have it; nay, he ought to be free from it; for as it is a crime not to have what he ought, it is also a crime to have what he ought not. Therefore, as it is a crime in man not to have that power which he received to avoid sin, it is also a crime to have that inability by which he can neither do right and avoid sin, nor restore the debt which he owes on account of his sin. For it is by his own free action that he loses that power, and falls into this inability. For not to have the power which one ought to have, is the same thing as to have the inability which one ought not to have. Therefore man's inability to restore what he owes to God, an inability brought upon himself for that

very purpose, does not excuse man from paying; for the result of sin cannot excuse the sin itself.

Boso. This argument is exceedingly weighty, and must be true.

Anselm. Man, then, is unjust in not paying what he owes to God.

Boso. This is very true; for he is unjust, both in not paying, and in not being able to pay.

Anselm. But no unjust person shall be admitted to happiness; for as that happiness is complete in which there is nothing wanting, so it can belong to no one who is not so pure as to have no injustice found in him.

Boso. I dare not think otherwise.

Anselm. He, then, who does not pay God what he owes can never be happy.

Boso. I cannot deny that this is so.

Anselm. But if you choose to say that a merciful God remits to the suppliant his debt, because he cannot pay; God must be said to dispense with one of two things, viz., either this which man ought voluntarily to render but cannot, that is, an equivalent for his sin, a thing which ought not to be given up even to save the whole universe besides God; or else this, which, as I have before said, God was about to take away from man by punishment, even against man's will, viz., happiness. But if God gives up what man ought freely to render, for the reason that man cannot repay it, what is this but saying that God gives up what he is unable to obtain? But it is mockery to ascribe such compassion to God. But if God gives up what he was about to take from unwilling man, because man is unable to restore what he ought to restore freely, He abates the punishment and makes man happy on account of his sin, because he has what he ought not to have. For he ought not to have this inability, and therefore as long as he has it without atonement it is his sin. And truly such compassion on the part of God is wholly contrary to the Divine justice, which allows nothing but punishment as the recompense of sin. Therefore, as God cannot be inconsistent with himself, his compassion cannot be of this nature.

Boso. I think, then, we must look for another mercy than this.

Anselm. But suppose it were true that God pardons the man who does not pay his debt because he cannot.

Boso. I could wish it were so.

Anselm. But while man does not make payment, he either wishes to restore, or else he does not wish to. Now, if he wishes to do what he cannot, he will be needy, and if he does not wish to, he will be unjust.

Boso. Nothing can be plainer.

Anselm. But whether needy or unjust, he will not be happy.

Boso. This also is plain.

Anselm. So long, then, as he does not restore, he will not be happy.

Boso. If God follows the method of justice, there is no escape for the miserable wretch, and God—s compassion seems to fail.

Anselm. You have demanded an explanation; now hear it. I do not deny that God is merciful, who preserveth man and beast, according to the multitude of his mercies. But we are speaking of that exceeding pity by which he makes man happy after this life. And I think that I have amply proved, by the reasons given above, that happiness ought not to be bestowed upon any one whose sins have not been wholly put away; and that this remission ought not to take place, save by the payment of the debt incurred by sin, according to the extent of sin. And if you think that any objections can be brought against these proofs, you ought to mention them.

Boso. I see not how your reasons can be at all invalidated.

Anselm. Nor do I, if rightly understood. But even if one of the whole number be confirmed by impregnable truth, that should be sufficient. For truth is equally secured against all doubt, if it be demonstrably proved by one argument as by many.

Boso. Surely this is so. But how, then, shall man be saved, if he neither pays what he owes, and ought not to be saved without paying? Or, with what face shall we declare that God, who is rich in mercy above human conception, cannot exercise this compassion?

Anselm. This is the question which you ought to ask of those in whose behalf you are speaking, who have no faith in the need of Christ for man's salvation, and you should also request them to tell how man can be saved without Christ. But, if they are utterly unable to do it, let them cease from mocking us, and let them hasten to unite themselves with us, who do not doubt that man can be saved through Christ; else let them despair of being saved at all. And if this terrifies them, let them believe in Christ as we do, that they may be saved.

Boso. Let me ask you, as I have begun, to show me how a man is saved by Christ.

CHAPTER 25

How man's salvation by Christ is necessarily possible.

Anselm. Is it not sufficiently proved that man can be saved by Christ, when even infidels do not deny that man can be happy somehow, and it has been sufficiently shown that, leaving Christ out of view, no salvation can be found for man? For, either by Christ or by some one else can man be saved, or else not at all. If, then, it is false that man cannot be saved at all, or that he can be saved in any other way, his salvation must necessarily be by Christ.

Boso. But what reply will you make to a person who perceives that man cannot be saved in any other way, and yet, not understanding how he can be saved by Christ, sees fit to declare that there cannot be any salvation either by Christ or in any other way?

Anselm. What reply ought to be made to one who ascribes impossibility to a necessary truth, because he does not understand how it can be?

Boso. That he is a fool.

Anselm. Then what he says must be despised.

Boso. Very true; but we ought to show him in what way the thing is true which he holds to be impossible.

Anselm. Do you not perceive, from what we have said above, that it is necessary for some men to attain to felicity? For, if it is unfitting for God to elevate man with any stain upon him, to that for which he made him free from all stain, lest it should seem that God had repented of his good intent, or was unable to accomplish his designs; far more is it impossible, on account of the same unfitness, that no man should be exalted to that state for which he was made. Therefore, a satisfaction such as we have above proved necessary for sin, must be found apart from the Christian faith, which no reason can show; or else we must accept the Christian doctrine. For what is clearly made out by absolute reasoning ought by no means to be questioned, even though the method of it be not understood.

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