

Anselm and the Atonement

I. The Life of Anselm¹

Youth in Italy, Adolescent Wanderings

1. **Italian Upbringing.** Anselm was born in 1033 in Aosta in Italy. He was a “religiously sensitive youth” and was inclined to reading, writing, and studying.²
2. **Father’s Wishes.** Anselm’s father, Gundulf, forbade him from entering into an abbey for the purpose of living out a scholarly life. Instead, he desired that his son should live out a political life and earn renown for their family.
3. **Anselm’s Protest.** Anselm figured that if he were ill that perhaps he would be admitted to the abbey since he was in danger of dying. He prayed thoroughly that he would contract a serious illness. And, although he did get very sick, he was still refused admission because of his father’s wishes.
4. **Wandering Season.** In response to his dreams of a scholarly life as a monk, Anselm wandered about Europe and eventually at the age of 27 settled at Bec, Normandy studying under Lanfranc, an Italian scholar who was the leader of this French abbey.

Bec Monastery and Lanfranc

Life of Obscurity. Lanfranc was a brilliant scholar and Anselm thought that he would be able to learn a lot from him while remaining himself in obscurity. You see, Anselm knew that he had profound intellectual gifts but he didn’t want to be in the limelight. He figured that his own contributions would be so outshone by Lanfranc’s that nobody would pay him any attention. Anselm wanted to live in obscurity; in other words, he was a perfect introvert.

Abbot at Bec Monastery

1. **Anselm’s Rise.** After Anselm had been at the abbey for three years, Lanfranc was asked to become the Archbishop of Canterbury—the highest position of the church in England. It was only a few years prior that William the Conqueror had sailed across the English Channel and conquered England for the Normans (I.E. the French) and the new rulers needed new bishops. With Lanfranc called to service elsewhere, Anselm was made the new leader of the abbey at Bec. This was rather disagreeable to Anselm who desired to have uninterrupted time for studying and contemplation. Nonetheless, under his leadership the abbey became renowned for its scholarship, propelling Anselm into an even more high-profile role.
2. **Proslogion.** It was also during this time that Anselm made the first of his several lasting theological contributions. He wrote entitled *Proslogion* and set forth his famous, though rather perplexing, argument for the existence of God. To quote from Galli and Olsens’ summary, “God is “that which nothing greater can be thought,” he argued. We cannot think of this entity as anything but existing because a god who exists is greater than one

¹Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Anselm,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 28-29. Information from this section is drawn from this source unless specified otherwise.

²Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 431.

Anselm and the Atonement

who merely is an idea. The argument, though contested almost as soon as it was written, has influenced philosophers even into the twentieth century.”³

3. **Method.** Anselm was persuaded that without faith one could not wholly trust reason. He asserted that “I believe in order to understand.” To quote Galli and Olsen again, “He didn’t despise reason; in fact he employed it in all his writings. He simply believed knowledge cannot lead to faith, and knowledge gained outside of faith is untrustworthy.”⁴
 - a. “A Christian should advance through faith to understanding, not come to faith through understanding, or withdraw from faith if he cannot understand” (Anselm, *Epistle* 136).⁵

Archbishop of Canterbury

1. **Anselm in England.** After the Norman invasion of England, the Abbey of Bec was given land across the Channel in England. Occasionally, as part of his duties as leader of the Bec Abbey, Anselm would go across the sea to check on their land holdings. While he was over there he made a good impression on the English clergy.
2. **Anselm of Canterbury.** When Lanfranc died in 1089, the English clergy wanted Anselm to fill the role but the king, William II, thought otherwise. Four years went by without a replacement until the king became seriously ill and was persuaded that his poor health was caused in part by his reluctance to appoint Anselm as Archbishop of Canterbury.⁶ The king repented of his poor behavior and, among other repayments, appointed Anselm as Archbishop in 1093.

Political Trouble

Quiet Courage.⁷ The king survived his sickness and soon began to butt heads with Anselm. The two disagreed about the role of the government—that being the king and his men—and the church—that being the Roman Catholic Church. The king did not want to be under the jurisdiction of the pope and Anselm did not want to be under the jurisdiction of the king. Ultimately, the king fabricated charges against Anselm and made him leave the country in 1097.⁸

- a. “Anselm was a man of gentleness and goodness who has remained one of the best respected thinkers in church history. He himself was so full of the traditional authorities for Christian thought and so humble that he was unaware of the originality of his own thought. Modern readers are still captured by the charm of his writing and the care of his argumentation.”⁹

³Galli and Olsen, 28.

⁴Galli and Olsen, 28.

⁵Ferguson, 432.

⁶Barlow, Frank, *William Rufus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 298-299. Cited from Wikipedia, “Anselm of Caterbury”.

⁷Ferguson, 431.

⁸Ferguson, 431.

⁹Ferguson, 432.

Anselm and the Atonement

Exile

1. **Italian Vacay.** Anselm departed to Rome and then eventually to Capua, a town south of Rome, where he wrote a second famous theological work.
2. ***Cur Deus Homo*.** The English title for this book is “*Why the God-Man*”¹⁰ In it, Anselm has a dialogue with his friend Boso about why Christ had to become a man, suffer on the cross for sins, die bearing the guilt of his people, and pacify the wrath of God for their disobedience. In short, it explained why and how God was reconciled to man by the cross. This will be the subject of our investigation in the theological section of today’s lesson.

Return

Anselm’s Return...Sorta. In 1100, Anselm was recalled to England by the new King, Henry I... But, Anselm refused to do homage to the king and was exiled again in 1103. He returned again in 1106 and this time worked out a compromise that “recognized the rights of the church and the crown respectively in appointments to church office.”¹¹

Death

Unfinished Business. It was less than three years later that Anselm died. On his deathbed he told his fellow monks that he wished to answer Augustine’s question of the origin of the soul—he was concerned that if he didn’t do it, no one else would. However, he never got to write that work. Anselm’s life was one of service intellectually, administratively, and politically. His greatest contributions were those of his mind and he is still celebrated today for them.

II. The Atonement

Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*

1. **God’s Design and Sin.** “Sin is so serious because sin is against God, who demands unswerving allegiance. At the same time, God is also concerned for human welfare. Along with the feudal idea of owing God his due there is God’s purpose of human fellowship with himself.”
2. **The God-Man.** “God’s purpose was temporarily thwarted by human sin. As the sinner, only a human being ought to make satisfaction for sin, but so great is the offense (since it was against the supreme God) that only God can make the satisfaction. Hence, the need for the God-Man, one both God and man.”¹²
3. **Atonement.** “Jesus Christ as a human being needed to do no more than remain righteous, but he did something more—he died. Death was the punishment for sin, so as a sinless person Christ had no need to die. Christ made his death an offering (sacrifice) to God, presented of free will and not of debt. He offered himself as a man; but what he

¹⁰Ferguson, 433.

¹¹Ferguson, 431.

¹²Ferguson, 433.

Anselm and the Atonement

did as a man was multiplied infinitely in its worth, for he was also Deity. He offered an infinite satisfaction for sin.”¹³

- a. “Using contractual language, Anselm then says Christ could will the reward for his deeds over to human beings as a means of redeeming them.”¹⁴

The Atonement

1. **Definition:** “The atonement is the work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation.”¹⁵
 - a. Louis Berkhof called it “the heart of the gospel.”¹⁶
2. **Why the atonement?** Because of the sinfulness of sin.
 - a. *God’s Law.* The law reflects God’s character, it is not arbitrary and it cannot be changed (Mt 5:17-18).¹⁷
 - b. *Justice.* “The justice of God, which guarantees rich blessings to those who obey the law, *necessarily* inflicts due punishment on transgressors... This means that the penalty of sin is something which of right and therefore necessarily follows transgression, and not something which God arbitrarily or with a view to some specific purpose attaches to infraction of the law.”¹⁸
3. **Who caused the atonement?** The Triune God.
 - a. “What was the ultimate cause that led to Christ’s coming to earth and dying for our sins? To this we must trace the question back to something in the character of God himself. And here Scripture points to two things: the *love* of God and *justice* of God.”¹⁹
 - b. Jn 3:16; Rom 3:25
4. **Did Jesus need to die?** Yes.
 - a. *Salvation was not necessary.* It was not necessary that God save anyone. He did not spare the angels when they sinned against him (2 Pet 2:4).²⁰
 - b. *God desired to save.* Therefore, God sent his Son into the world to save some. Scripture makes it clear that there was no other way to save his people apart from his death (Mt 26:39; Lk 24:25-26; Heb 2:17).²¹
5. **What is the nature of the atonement?** Jesus perfectly obeyed the Father and gave us his perfect obedience; Jesus perfectly received the Father’s penalty for sin and took away our sin guilt (2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9; Rom 5:19). He obeyed and suffered for us.
Obeyed

¹³Ferguson 434.

¹⁴Ferguson, 434.

¹⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 568.

¹⁶Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 367.

¹⁷Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1936), 60–61.

¹⁸Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 61-62.

¹⁹Grudem, 568. Emphasis original.

²⁰Grudem, 569.

²¹Grudem, 569.

Anselm and the Atonement

- a. *If we are not given his righteousness...* We would be returned to the state of Adam and Eve, we would not merit heaven. Christ had to earn righteousness for us, otherwise we would never be able to be with God.²²
 - i. “By way of application, we ought to ask ourselves whose lifelong record of obedience we would rather rely on for our standing before God, Christ’s or our own? As we think about the life of Christ, we ought to ask ourselves, was it good enough to deserve God’s approval? And are we willing to rely on his record of obedience for our eternal destiny?”²³

Suffered

- a. *Jesus bore our sufferings throughout his life* (Mt 4:1-11; Heb 5:8; Isa 53:3).
- b. *Jesus bore our sufferings painfully on the cross* (Mt 26:38).
- c. *Jesus bore our sin guilt* (Isa 53:6, 12; Jn 1:29; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 2:24).
- d. *Jesus was abandoned* (Mt 26:56, 27:46).
- e. *Jesus bore the wrath of God* (Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 Jn 2:2).
 - i. Propitiation: “a sacrifice that bears God’s wrath to the end and in so doing changes God’s wrath toward us into favor.”²⁴
 - ii. Or “a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God—and thereby makes God propitious (or favorable) toward us.”²⁵
 - iii. God the Father poured out his wrath upon Jesus; “These verses simply mean that Jesus bore the wrath of God against sin.”²⁶

*Because of the love of God, the Father sent the son into the World to redeem sinners; because of the justice of God that sin had to be paid for. Before we could ever enjoy any of the benefits of Christ’s life, the wrath of God had to be satisfied in Christ’s death.*²⁷ *Having paid it all, he said “It is finished” and gave up his spirit.*

False Views of The Atonement

1. **Moral Influence Theory—Abelard.** “The moral-exemplary theory of the atonement has had fewer champions throughout history, but it was advanced in the twelfth century by Abelard.”²⁸ This view teaches that God did not require a payment for sin, “but that Christ’s death was simply a way in which God showed how much he loved human beings by identifying with their sufferings, even to the point of death.”²⁹
2. **Ransom to Satan Theory—Origin.** “According to this view, the ransom Christ paid to redeem us was paid to Satan, in whose kingdom all people were by virtue of sin.”³⁰

²²Grudem, 570.

²³Grudem, 571.

²⁴Grudem, 575.

²⁵Grudem, 575.

²⁶Grudem, 575.

²⁷Grudem, 575-76.

²⁸Ferguson, 435.

²⁹Grudem, 581.

³⁰Grudem, 581.

Anselm and the Atonement

3. **Example Theory—Socinus.** Like the Moral Influence Theory but different in that it affirms that Jesus's death was primarily an example to us of how we ought to obey and love God no matter what. This teaches us how to live and doesn't tell us how much God loves us.

III. Summary

Penal. Christ bore the penalty for our sin when he died; he received the wrath of God for our sin.³¹

Substitutionary. "His death was also a 'substitution' in that he was a substitute for us when he died."³²

Application—What happened for you at the cross?

- There is no more sin for us to pay; therefore, we should have "no remaining fear of punishment or condemnation."³³
- These are the jewels of the gospel that we must lay hold of by faith and apply to ourselves: Christ obeyed and suffered for me. Reflecting on the atonement will be to us as a refreshing spring on a hot day.

³¹Grudem, 579.

³²Grudem, 579.

³³Grudem, 578.