

# 15. Proslogion

## Chapter 1

### *A rousing of the mind to the contemplation of God*

Come now, insignificant mortal. Leave behind your concerns for a little while, and retreat for a short time from your restless thoughts. Cast off your burdens and cares; set aside your labor and toil. Just for a little while make room for God and rest a while in him. “Enter into the chamber” of your mind, shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him, and seek him “behind closed doors.”<sup>1</sup> Speak now, my whole heart: say to God, “I seek your face; your face, Lord, do I seek.”<sup>2</sup>

Come now, O Lord my God. Teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here, where shall I seek you, since you are absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you, since you are present? Truly “you dwell in unapproachable light.”<sup>3</sup> And where is this “unapproachable light”? How am I to approach an unapproachable light? Who will lead me into it, so that I can see you in it? And by what signs am I to seek you? Under what aspect? I have never seen you, O Lord my God; I do not know your face. What shall he do, O Lord Most High? What shall he do, this distant exile from you? What shall your servant do, deeply troubled by his love for you and “banished far from your face”?<sup>4</sup> He longs to see you, but your face is too far away from him. He desires to approach your presence, but your dwelling is unapproachable. He wants to find you, but he does not know where you are. He aspires to seek you, but he does not know your face. Lord, you are my

God, and you are my Lord, but I have never seen you. You have made me and remade me, you have given me every good thing that is mine, and still I do not know you. I was created so that I might see you, but I have not yet done what I was created to do.

How wretched human beings are! They have lost the very thing for which they were created. Hard and terrible was their fall! Alas! Think what they have lost and what they have found; think what they left behind and what they kept. They have lost the happiness for which they were created and found an unhappiness for which they were not created. They left behind the only source of happiness and kept what brings nothing but misery. Once “human beings ate the bread of angels,”<sup>5</sup> for which they now hunger; now they “eat the bread of sorrow,”<sup>6</sup> which once they did not know. Alas for the common lamentation of human beings, the universal outcry of the children of Adam! He was satisfied to the full; we sigh with hunger. He had everything he needed; we go begging. He happily possessed those things and abandoned them in misery; we unhappily do without them and miserably desire them, but alas, we remain empty handed. Why did he not preserve for us, as he could easily have done, what we so woefully lack? Why did he thus shut us out from the light and cover us with darkness? Why did he take away our life and inflict death upon us? What wretches we are! Think whence we have been cast out, whither we have been driven; thrown down from so great a height, and buried so deep. From our homeland into exile; from the vision of God into our blindness; from the joy of immortality into the bitterness and terror of death. What a wretched change! From such great good into such great evil! O woeful loss, woeful sorrow, all is woeful!

Alas, wretched man that I am, one of the wretched children of Eve, far from the presence of God. What have I undertaken, and what have I accomplished?

---

From Anselm, *Basic Writings*, tr. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

1. Matt. 6:6.

2. Ps. 27:8 (= Vulgate 26:8).

3. 1 Tim. 6:16.

4. Ps. 51:11 (50:13).

---

5. Ps. 78:25 (77:25).

6. Ps. 127:2 (126:2).

Where was I heading, and where have I come to? What was I reaching toward, and what do I long for? “I have sought the good,”<sup>7</sup> and “behold, confusion!”<sup>8</sup> I was heading for God but stumbled over myself. I sought rest in my solitude but “found trials and sorrow”<sup>9</sup> deep within. I wanted to laugh as my mind rejoiced, but I am forced to “cry out as my heart weeps.”<sup>10</sup> Joy was hoped for, but look where the sighs are closing in.

“How long, O Lord?”<sup>11</sup> How long, O Lord, will you forget us? How long will you turn your face from us?<sup>12</sup> When will you look favorably upon us and hear us? When will you “enlighten our eyes”<sup>13</sup> and show us your face?<sup>14</sup> When will you give yourself to us again? Look favorably upon us, O Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us again, that it might go well for us; for without you it goes so badly for us. Take pity upon our toils and strivings after you, for without you we can do nothing. You call us; come to our aid. I beseech you, Lord: let me not sigh in despair, but let me breathe hopefully again. I beseech you, Lord: my heart is made bitter with its desolation; sweeten it with your consolation. I beseech you, Lord: in my hunger I began to seek you; let me not depart from you empty. I have come to you starving; let me not leave unsatisfied. I have come as a beggar to one who is rich, as a pitiful wretch to one who has pity; let me not go back penniless and despised. If indeed “I sigh before I eat,”<sup>15</sup> grant that I might eat after I sigh. Lord, I am bent double; I can only look down. Raise me up so that I can turn my gaze upwards. “My sins are heaped up over my head” and entangle me; “like a heavy burden” they weigh me down.<sup>16</sup> Extricate me;

7. Ps. 122:9 (121:9).

8. Jer. 14:19.

9. Ps. 116:3 (114:3).

10. Ps. 38:8 (37:9).

11. Ps. 6:3 (6:4).

12. Cf. Ps. 13:1 (12:1).

13. Cf. Ps. 13:3 (12:4).

14. Cf. Pss. 80:3,7,19 (79:4, 8, 20).

15. Job 3:24.

16. Ps. 38:4 (37:5).

lift my burdens, “lest like a pit they swallow me up.”<sup>17</sup> Let me look up at your light, whether from afar or from the depths. Teach me how to seek you, and show yourself to me when I seek. For I cannot seek you unless you teach me how, and I cannot find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you. Let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you.

I acknowledge, Lord, and I thank you, that you have created in me this image of you so that I may remember you, think of you, and love you. Yet this image is so eroded by my vices, so clouded by the smoke of my sins, that it cannot do what it was created to do unless you renew and refashion it. I am not trying to scale your heights, Lord; my understanding is in no way equal to that. But I do long to understand your truth in some way, your truth which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that “Unless I believe, I shall not understand.”<sup>18</sup>

*Chapter 2*

## Chapter 2

### *That God truly exists*

Therefore, Lord, you who grant understanding to faith, grant that, insofar as you know it is useful for me, I may understand that you exist as we believe you exist, and that you are what we believe you to be. Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought. So can it be that no such nature exists, since “The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God”?”<sup>19</sup> But when this same fool hears me say “something than which nothing greater can be thought,” he surely understands what he hears; and

17. Ps. 69:15 (68: 16).

18. Cf. Isa. 7:9 in the Old Latin version: “Unless you believe, you will not understand.” Anselm is here indebted to Augustine, who frequently appealed to this verse in explaining his views on the relationship between faith and reason.

19. Pss. 14:1 (13:1); 53:1 (52:1).

what he understands exists in his understanding,<sup>20</sup> even if he does not understand that it exists [in reality]. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the understanding and quite another to understand that the object exists [in reality]. When a painter, for example, thinks out in advance what he is going to paint, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand that it exists, since he has not yet painted it. But once he has painted it, he both has it in his understanding and understands that it exists because he has now painted it. So even the fool must admit that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then the very thing than which a greater *cannot* be thought is something than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.

### Chapter 3

*That he cannot be thought not to exist*

This [being] exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For it is possible to think that something exists that cannot be thought not to exist, and such a being is greater than one that can be thought not to exist. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought is *not* that than which a greater cannot be thought; and

20. The word here translated 'understanding' is *intellectus*. The text would perhaps read better if I translated it as 'intellect,' but this would obscure the fact that it is from the same root as the verb *intelligere*, 'to understand.' Some of what Anselm says makes a bit more sense if this fact is constantly borne in mind.

this is a contradiction. So that than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist.

And this is you, O Lord our God. You exist so truly, O Lord my God, that you cannot even be thought not to exist. And rightly so, for if some mind could think something better than you, a creature would rise above the Creator and sit in judgment upon him, which is completely absurd. Indeed, everything that exists, except for you alone, can be thought not to exist. So you alone among all things have existence most truly, and therefore most greatly; for whatever else exists has existence less truly, and therefore less greatly. So then why did "the fool say in his heart, 'There is no God,'" when it is so evident to the rational mind that you among all beings exist most greatly? Why indeed, except because he is stupid and a fool?

### Chapter 4

*How the fool said in his heart  
what cannot be thought*

But how has he said in his heart what he could not think? Or how could he not think what he said in his heart, since to say in one's heart is the same as to think? But if he really—or rather, *since* he really—thought this, because he said it in his heart, and did not say it in his heart, because he could not think it, there must be more than one way in which something is "said in one's heart" or "thought." In one way, to think a thing is to think the word that signifies that thing. But in another way, it is to understand what the thing is. God can be thought not to exist in the first way, but not at all in the second way. No one who understands what God is can think that God does not exist, although he may say these words in his heart with no signification at all, or with some peculiar signification. For God is that than which a greater cannot be thought. Whoever understands this properly, understands that this being exists in such a way that he cannot, even in thought, fail to exist. So whoever understands that God exists in this way cannot think that he does not exist.

Thanks be to you, my good Lord, thanks be to you. For what I once believed through your grace, I now understand through your illumination, so that even if

I did not want to *believe* that you exist, I could not fail to *understand* that you exist.

## Chapter 5

*That God is whatever it is better to be than not to be; and that he alone exists through himself and makes all other things from nothing*

Then what are you, Lord God, than which nothing greater can be thought? What are you, if not the greatest of all beings, who alone exists through himself and made all other things from nothing? For whatever is not this is less than the greatest that can be thought, but this cannot be thought of you. What good is missing from the supreme good, through which every good thing exists? And so you are just, truthful, happy, and whatever it is better to be than not to be. For it is better to be just than unjust, and better to be happy than unhappy.

## Chapter 6

*How God can perceive even though he is not a body*

Now it is better to be percipient, omnipotent, merciful, and impassible than not. But how can you perceive if you are not a body? How can you be omnipotent if you cannot do everything? How can you be both merciful and impassible? If only corporeal things can perceive, because the senses exist in a body and are directed toward bodies, then how can you perceive? For you are not a body but the highest spirit, which is better than any body.

But if to perceive is just to know, or is aimed at knowledge—for whoever perceives knows according to the appropriate sense, as, for example, we know colors through sight and flavors through taste—then it is not inappropriate to say that whatever in some way knows also in some way perceives. Therefore, Lord, although you are not a body, you are indeed supremely percipient in the sense that you supremely know all things, not in the sense in which an animal knows things through its bodily senses.

## Chapter 7

*In what sense God is omnipotent even though there are many things he cannot do*

But how are you omnipotent if you cannot do everything?<sup>21</sup> And how can you do everything if you cannot be corrupted, or lie, or cause what is true to be false (as, for example, to cause what has been done not to have been done), or many other such things?

Or is the ability to do these things not power but weakness? For someone who can do these things can do what is not beneficial to himself and what he ought not to do. And the more he can do these things, the more power misfortune and wickedness have over him, and the less he has over them. So whoever can do these things can do them, not in virtue of his power but in virtue of his weakness. So when we say that he “can” do these things, it is not because he has the power to do them, but because his weakness gives something else power over him. Or else it is some other manner of speaking, such as we often use in speaking loosely. For example, we sometimes say ‘to be’ instead of ‘not to be,’ or ‘to do’ instead of ‘not to do’ or ‘to do nothing.’ For often when someone denies that something exists, we say “It is as you say it is”; but it would seem more correct to say “It is not as you say it is not.” Again, we say “This man is sitting just as that man is doing” or “This man is resting just as that man is doing”; but to sit is not to do anything, and to rest is to do nothing. In the same way, then, when someone is said to have the “power” to do or suffer something that is not beneficial to himself or that he ought not to do, by ‘power’ we really mean ‘weakness.’ For the more he has this “power,” the more power misfortune and wickedness have over him, and the less he has over

21. This chapter is full of word play in the Latin that does not all come across in English. The words for ‘power’ (*potentia*), ‘weakness’ (*impotentia*), and various forms of the verb ‘can’ (*posse*)—also translated here as ‘have power’—all share a common stem. And the word for ‘omnipotent’ (*omnipotens*) means literally “able to do everything” (*omnia potens*).