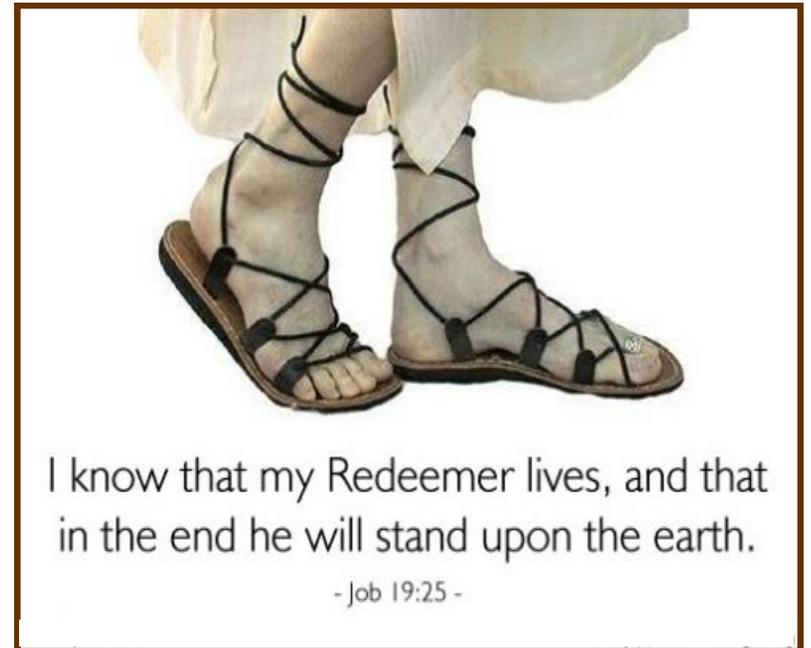


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Job

Chapter Eleven:



Law and Divine Transcendence

The commentary on the Book of Job, is by Saint Thomas Aquinas and was translated by Brian Mulladay and edited by Rev. Joseph Kenny, O.P. The book shows how human affairs are ruled by divine providence using probable arguments.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: LAW AND DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE

The First Lesson: The Infinite Grandeur of God

1 Then Sophar the Naamathite answered: 2 Will he who talks a great deal not also listen? Or will a glib man be justified? 3 Will men keep silence for you alone? When you have derided the others, will no one answer you? 4 For you have said: My speech is pure. And I am clean in your sight. 5 Would that God could speak with you and open his lips to you 6 to show you the secrets of his wisdom, that his law is versatile. Then you would understand that you are being punished much less that your evil merits. 7 Will you perhaps understand the footprints of God, and will you discover the truth even to the perfect Omnipotence of God. 8 He is higher than the heaven and what will you do? He is deeper than hell and from what will you know him? 9 He is longer than the earth in measure and wider than the sea! 10 If he wills to sweep them all away or draw them together into one mass, who will contradict him? Or who can say to him: Why did you do this?’

In the speech above (10:16), Job had remarked with wonder that among other evils which he was suffering he had been tormented by his friends who rose against him like witnesses speaking for God. Sophar, who was touched by this argument answers. So the text says, “Then Sophar the Naamathite answered, ‘Will he who talks a lot not also to listen?’ He means: You have spoken many things in a disordered way and so it is not surprising that you are censured by your friends. For if a man who speaks many things were not censured, it would follow that men would be held just simply from the fact that they talked a lot. So the text continues, “Or will a glib man be justified?” i.e. will he be considered just? Since Job could say to him that he should have been deferred to because of his dignity, he excludes this objection saying, “Will men keep silence for you alone, when you have derided the others? will no one answer you?” For he understood Job had mocked the others because he termed them witnesses for God (10:17) and when he had said above, “Why do you slander true ideas?” (6:25) So he says Job ought not to be surprised if the others also speak against him. But perhaps Job could say that they have no reason to reproach him or his words. To reject this he continues, “For you have said: My speech is pure.” He makes this interpretation according to what Job had said already, “You will find no evil on my tongue, nor will stupidity resound on my lips” (6:30); and “I am clean in your sight.” Job had not expressly said this, but Sophar wanted to take this interpretation from his words to say that Job had argued that he was not punished for sin. (10:14) Also from his statement, “Know I have done nothing wicked,” (10:17) or “Have I not dissembled? Was I not silent?” (3:26) he infers the same interpretation.

“You will not perhaps understand the footprints of God.”

Job

As Job had said a second time above that his days has been used up, “without any hope,” (7:6) Sophar then says, “You will have confidence when hope has been proposed to you.” Because Job also had rejected above the opinion of those who said that man returns again after death, after the passage of many centuries, to this same kind of life [7:16 ff.], he does not say that this hope is proposed to him, but hope of the kind in which men live after death in the memories of men. This happens in two ways: In one way in the graves in which the bodies of the dead are placed, so that the memory of the dead is preserved So they are even called monuments, and to show this he says, “When you have been buried, you will sleep safe in the grave,” as if to say: No one will violate your tomb nor should you even be afraid that anyone may try, and so he then says, “You will rest and there will be no one to frighten you.” In another way, the dead live in the memories of men because of the good deeds which they did while they were alive for which their life would be desirable. Addressing this he then says, “many intercede in longing for your face,” that is, very many will earnestly desire your presence or show reverence for your tomb, remembering your good deeds.

Because he had promised these rewards if Job be willing to depart from evil, he shows as a consequence that these rewards are not given to the evil man. So he continues, “The eyes of the wicked will be deficient,” because they will not obtain the good which they desire. For the someone’s eyes are said to be deficient when he looks to obtain something which he is not strong enough to obtain. Just as the wicked cannot obtain desired goods, so too they cannot avoid evils which they suffer or fear. So he continues, “they will lose every means of flight,” because they will not be able to flee evil things. After death, however, they will not be held in veneration or missed, but they will be held in abomination because of the evils which they have done, and he addresses this theme saying, “and their hope is the loathing of the soul,” which means, that what they can hope for after death is to be in abomination.

END OF JOB CHAPTER 11

However, one should be careful to note that since sin is a turning aside from the law of God, one cannot know if something is a sin or its magnitude, if one does not know the law of God for “The straight line is the judge of both itself and the crooked line.” So since Job said he was free from sin or he had not sinned as gravely as he was punished, Sophar understood from this that Job did not perfectly understand the law of God. Therefore he says, “Would that God would speak with you and open his lips to you!” He seems to want to insult Job because Job had asked, “Tell me why you judge me so.” (10:3) God is said to speak to man simply when he inspires something of his wisdom in man’s heart, according to Psalm 84, “I will hear what my God says to me.” (v.9) However, God opens his lips when he reveals something to men by means of his effects. For words are formed exteriorly with the lips by which we express the interior concepts of the heart.

Take note that we fail to understand divine things in two ways. First, because as we cannot know “the invisible things of God” except through “things which have been created” (Rom. 1:20) and things which have been created express the power of the creator very weakly, many things must remain to be considered in the creator which are hidden from us. These are called the secrets of the wisdom of God. He speaks about these saying, “to show you the secrets of his wisdom.” Second, because we are not even able to understand the very order of creatures in itself completely in the manner in which it is governed by divine providence. For divine government functions in a very different way from human government. Among men, one is superior in ruling to the extent that his ordering extends to more universal considerations only and he leaves the particular details of government to his subordinates. Thus the law under the direction of a higher ruler is universal and simple. But God is more superior in ruling the more his ordering power extends even to the most insignificant matters. So, the law of his rule is not only secret if we consider the high character of the ruler in exceeding completely any proportion to a creature, but also in the versatility with which he governs every single thing, even the most isolated and most insignificant according to a fixed order. So he continues, “his law is versatile.”

One must certainly reflect on this not only in natural things in that they are subject to the rule of God, but also in human affairs. For human laws respect certain universal things which happen in the majority of cases because those who frame them were not able to consider every single case. The manner in which universal human statutes should be applied to individual deeds is left to the prudence of the administrator. Therefore, man can fall short of righteousness in many things, which are still not contrary to human positive law. But divine law extends to all particulars even to the most insignificant things because it exists in the wisdom of God. Thus a man cannot be discordant with righteousness in something and not be in violation of the divine law. Since then man cannot attain the divine law itself as though investigating things hidden in the wisdom of God, and consequently cannot understand its complexity, he sometimes does not think he is acting against the law of God when in fact he is, or he thinks he is sinning a little when he is sinning a lot. So he then says, "Then you would understand," i.e. if the secrets of God's wisdom and the complex character of the law of God had been revealed to you, "that you are being punished much less by him," in sustaining your punishments, "than your evil merits," which you are either not aware of or think is small. In this he seems to be criticizing what Job had said already, "Would that my sins for which I merit your anger were weighed in scales and the calamity which I suffer was weighed in a scale. The sands of the shore of the sea could not match them." (6:2)

Because he thought there was some hidden secret in God's wisdom which had not yet been revealed to Job, he strengthens this opinion in what follows trying to make it so sure that Job cannot deny it saying, "You will not perhaps understand the footprints of God." Footprints are signs of someone walking on a road. So the works of God are called his road and the production of creatures by God is understood as a kind of procession of God in his creatures inasmuch as the divine good derived from him in whom it exists simply and in the highest sense proceeds from him by degrees to effects when higher creatures are understood to be better than lower creatures. Therefore, the footprints of God are certain signs found in creatures by which God can be known in a certain sense through his creatures. But since the human mind cannot totally and perfectly understand creatures in themselves, much less can it have perfect knowledge about the Creator himself. Therefore, he then asks, "and will you discover the truth even about the perfect Omnipotence of God?" as if to say: If you cannot know creatures perfectly, much less can you know the Creator. He says plainly "will you discover" because reason proceeds by a certain process of investigation from effects to cause and as soon as reason knows the causes through the effects we are said to discover it.

But since Job had proposed above two arguments against the promise of prosperity in this life : the devastation of his own body when he said, "Decay clothes my flesh," (7:5) and the passing of the days of his life when he said, "My days have passed more quickly and so on." (7:6) So he answers both objections saying,

"The radiance of noon will come to you in the evening," as it so say: Although it seems to you that your days have passed away and your life is over almost like the twilight, such great prosperity can still come to you that it will almost lead you back to the joy of your youth.

For as old age is understood by twilight, so youth is understood by noon. Now he calls the clarity of earthly prosperity radiance. He then says, against what Job had said about the consumption of his own body, "although you thought that you have been used up," because of the weakness which you have suffered, "you will arise like the Lucifer," because your body will return to its youthful beauty.

Just as man turns to evil from vanity, so man does not think he is subject to divine judgment from the same vanity. He therefore continues, "The vain man puffs himself up with pride," so that he does not believe he is subject to a superior. So he continues, "He thinks he is born as free as the foal of a wild ass." The foal of a wild ass is born free from the domestication of man.

However, the foal of the asses which are born in human possession are born to serve the needs of man. Thus, men who do not think they are subject to divine judgment think they are like the foal of asses born wild, even though they see that other men are coerced by divine judgment who are in the same condition. He seemed to say this as an insult to Blessed Job because he takes Job's words as an argument with God as with an equal when he said, "May he withdraw his rod from me, let terror of him not frighten me. I will speak and not be afraid of him." (9:34) So he continues, "But you have hardened your heart," so you defend your evil. Yet, "You have stretched out your hands to God," in this condition of hardness of heart in prayer when you said, "I will say to God: Do not condemn me." (9:34) So your prayer is useless. For prayer is useful when man first puts evil aside and then asks God to stop punishing him. He speaks to this theme saying, "If you will take away the evil from yourself which is on your hands," namely, so that you desist from the evil work which you still have on your hands," and if you will not remain in your tent," i.e. if you make restitution of what you have unjustly taken away and stored away.

Or you correct the members of your household for whose delinquencies the masters are sometimes punished for their negligence in correcting them. "Then you lift up your head," in prayer to God, "free from stain," or fault. In this your condemnation will end, first for the future, and so he says, "and you will be stable," so that you are not shaken by trials later. Also "you will not fear" future dangers, because sometimes although he does not fear the future, a man is still afflicted about those things which he has lost or has suffered. He continues, "Your misery also," which you have suffered till not, "you will forget" because of the superabundance of the goods coming to you. He strengthens this with an example when he next says, "and you will not remember them, like floods which have passed." He says this because a man forgets the floods which have happened after the rainy season when calm returns, or because the waters of the flood rush swiftly away, and after they go, no memory of them remains.

One should also not be surprised if the Creator is not known if creatures are not perfectly understood, because even if creatures were perfectly known, the Creator would still not be. For a cause can only be perfectly known through its effects when the effects equal in power to the cause. This cannot be attributed to God. So he continues, "He is higher than the heaven and what will you do? He is deeper than hell and from what will you know him? He is longer than the earth in measure and wider than the sea." He says these things metaphorically. For he does not mean that God, who is incorporeal, is divided into corporeal dimensions, but he describes the greatness of his power using the metaphor of the great size of a body. This is because no matter how great the quantities of bodies seem to be in height, depth, length or breadth, they are still deficient if compared to the greatness of the power of God who can make greater things. So he plainly attributed "omnipotence" to God before (v.7). From this he shows that God cannot be discovered perfectly in his creatures, because even given the fact that all creatures were perfectly known, one cannot know the power equal to that of God adequately from them. Can one take a measure to know the power of God which exceeds every creature? He clarifies this difficulty when he says, "what will you do?" and "from what can you know him?"

Divine power not only exceeds every being in producing them, but also in preserving them in being. For the preservation of a creature is only from God and there is no power in the creature which could resist the divine will if he does not will to preserve the creature itself any more. So he continues, "If he wills to sweep them all away," by reducing them to nothing, i.e. by taking away their being, "or draw them together into mass," by confusing them when he takes away the order which distinguishes things, "who will contradict him?" i.e. what power of the creature will be able to so contrary to his will. To preclude someone from arguing that although nothing could be preserved in being except through him as if he is duty-bound, he next rejects this argument saying, "Or who can say to him: Why did you do this?" as though he were trying to require an explanation by him about some duty which he overlooked.

The Second Lesson: The Great Infinity of God

11 For he knows the vanity of men. When he sees something wicked, does he not consider it?

12 The vain man puffs himself up with pride. He thinks he is born free as the young wild ass.

13 But you have hardened your heart and you have stretched out your hands to God.

14 If you will take away the evil from yourself which is on your head, and if you will not remain in your tent,

15 then you will be able to lift up your head, free from stain and you will be stable. You will not fear.

16 Your misery also you will forget and you will not remember them, like floods which have passed.

17 The radiance of noon will come to you in the evening, and although you thought you had been used up, you will arise like Lucifer.

18 You will have confidence because hope has been proposed to you and when you have been buried you will sleep safe;

19 you will rest and there will be no one to frighten you, and many intercede in longing for your face.

20 The eyes of the wicked will be deficient and they will lose every means of flight, and their hope is the loathing of the soul.

After Sophar has shown that there is something hidden in divine wisdom which is incomprehensible to men, he proceeds to clarify something which he had only supposed before, namely that God exacts punishment for sin from man and he concludes as a certainty that God knows the deeds of man.

So he says: I am right in saying that smaller penalties are being exacted from you by God than your evil merits, "For he knows the vanity of man," i.e. the vain deeds of men. Things are commonly called vain when they are unstable because they have not been fixed in due ends. The vanity of man then comes from the fact that his heart is not fixed in the truth by which alone it can be securely founded. From the fact that he withdraws from the truth he does evil when he desires what is the apparent good in place of what is good.

So he then says, "When he (God) sees something wicked," produced by the vanity of men, "should he (God) not consider it," as worthy of punishment?

For a judge who sees a sin seems to pass over it without considering it when he keeps it secret and does chooses not to punish it. This shall not be said about God.

When he sees the vanity of men, he exacts punishment for their evil.