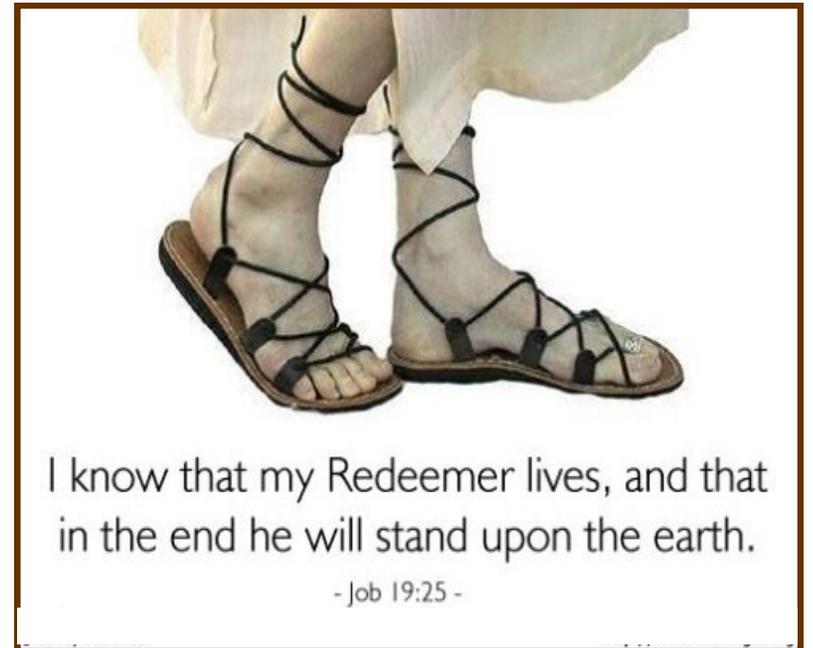


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Job

Chapter Twenty Three:



The Discourse of Job

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 TWENTY THREE: THE DISCOURSE OF JOB

The Lesson: Job Appeals to the Judgment of God

1 Job answered and said: 2 Now even my speech is bitter, and the hand of my wound has made my lament greater. 3 Who will grant me the ability to know him, find him and approach his throne? 4 I will place judgment before him and I will fill my mouth with rebukes, 5 to know how he answers me and to understand what he says to me. 6 I do not want him to argue with me with his great strength, nor crush me with the greatness of his power. 7 Let him propose fairly what he has against me and my claim will be victorious. 8 If I go to the East, he does not appear; if I go to the West, I will not understand him. 9 Or if I turn to the left, what will I do? I will not grasp him intellectually; if I turn to the right, I will not see him. 10 He knows my way and he will prove me as gold which passes through fire. 11 My foot followed his footprints, I have kept his way and I did not turn aside from it. 12 I have not departed from the commandments of his lips, and in my bosom I have hidden the words of his mouth. 13 Truly he is alone and no one can perceive his thoughts, and whatever his soul willed, he did it. 14 When he has accomplished his will in me and I stand before him, like many similar things are before him 15 on that account I am disturbed. When I consider him, I am overcome with fear. 16 God softened my heart and the Almighty threw me into confusion. 17 For I have not perished because of the darkness hemming me in, nor has the dark covered my face.

In his discourse Eliphaz proposed two changes against Job. (27:5,12) First, that he had been punished because of his very great evil. Second, that he had doubted or even denied divine providence. Now men are often saddened when any charges are falsely made against them, and so since Job did not see these things in himself he says, "Now also my speech is bitter," as if to say: As you saddened me above with your reproaches, so you do even now so I am compelled to speak with bitterness. When one affliction is added anew to someone already afflicted, the first afflictions come back to mind and aggravate the present lament, so he continues, "the hand," the power, "of my wound," of the adversity which I once suffered, "now has made my lament greater," because it makes the present pain more grave.

To the objection that this proof which he introduced on the basis of the righteousness of his life is not fitting, he shows as a consequence that the most certain and demonstrative proof cannot be introduced about divine judgments because of the incomprehensibility of the divine will. So he then says, "Truly he is alone," as if to say: There is no other creature like or equal to him who can comprehend him, and consequently his will. So he then says, "and no one can perceive," know with certainty, "his thoughts," the dispositions of his judgments. As the order in his judgment cannot be fully understood, so neither can it be resisted by any creature, and the text continues, "whatever his soul (the will) willed, he did," for no one is able to resist. Moreover, sometimes especially in the case of a wise man it happens he has ruled his own will according to his own virtue but cannot do anything else. But he disproves this is true in God when he says, "When he has accomplished his will in me, and I am before him like many other similar things are before him," as if to say: The reason that he does not bring more adversity against me, is not because he cannot do more, but because he does not will to. "On that account," because I consider that he can do more and I cannot tell whether he does will to do more, "I am disturbed," with the anguish of fear. So he then says, "when I consider him," his power, "I am more overcome with fear," that he is going to try me with still more grave adversity.

He expresses the cause of this anxious fear in the blow of God he has experienced against himself, and so he says, "God softened my heart," as though dissolving it in liquid, by taking away the strength of security. "And the Almighty threw me into confusion," for by his omnipotence he has brought in anguish of sadness about my present evils and fear of future ones. He then shows why he fears the future, although he is not conscious of guilt on his part, saying, "For I have not perished," i.e. I have endured adversity, "because of the darkness hemming me in," the errors and the sins which are said to hem one in when they are confirmed in the spirit of a man, for example, when he sins from malice. Malice is sometimes not confirmed in a man, but he is impelled to sin from some sudden passion, for example, of concupiscence or anger. Job excludes this from himself saying, "nor has the dark covered my face," for truly the eye of reason is darkened when its judgment is deceived in a particular act because of passion.

Since someone could object that, "If he knows your way, then, he punished you because of your sins," he answers, "and he will prove me as gold which passes through fire." Here he first clearly introduces the cause of his adversity which was brought on him so that from it he might appear proven before men. Just as gold is proven which can sustain fire; and just as gold does not become true gold because of the proof of fire, but its truth is clearly shown to men, so Job has been proved by adversity, not that his virtue might be manifested in the presence of God, but that it might be clearly shown to men. Moreover he says, "he will prove," about the future, as if to show that he is even ready for future testing because of his patience. He proves by the righteousness of his life that he was not punished for previous sin. Here one should remark that each thing is shown right when it conforms to its own rule. There is a twofold rule of human life. The first is, of course, the natural law impressed in the minds of men by God, by which man naturally understands what is good from its likeness to divine goodness. In this we should first notice that man imitates the operation of the divine goodness according to his own ability in his affections and works as Matthew says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," (5:48) and Ephesians, "Be Imitators of God as his dearest sons." (5:1) So he says, "My foot," the affection by which we proceed to act, "followed," by imitation, "his footprints," some similarity though small to the divine goodness in action. Second, one must take care to imitate God with his whole mind, and so he continues, "I have kept his way," because I was careful not to deviate from it. Third, man must persevere in this and remain fixed in it totally, not in part, and so he then says, "and I did not turn aside from it," i.e. I did not depart from it in any part of myself. The second rule of human life is the exterior law transmitted by divine inspiration, against which a man sins in two ways: in one way by contempt, and against this he says, "I have not departed from the commandments of his lips." For some precepts had been divinely given to Noah and perhaps to some other holy men on whose lips God spoke. Second, someone sins against the law of God through ignorance or forgetfulness, and against this he says, "and in my bosom," in the hidden part of the heart, "I have hidden the words of his mouth," according to Psalm 118, "In my heart I hid your words to not sin against you." (v.11)

First, then, he begins to answer the reproach that he was punished for his own malice. Now Job recognized that he had been punished by divine judgment and so he has already said, "God confines me with the wicked," (16:12) and therefore to search for the reason why he has been punished is to investigate the reason of divine judgment, which certainly no one can know but God alone. From this it is clear that Eliphaz had presumptuously asserted that Job had been punished because of malice. So he does not want to argue about this with Eliphaz, but turns the debate to God who alone knows the reason for his judgment. Now, Job could reckon that he was oppressed by divine judgment, if he had been punished for very great malice. Those who have been burdened by some judge usually approach the judge first. They cannot do this unless they find his bench and they cannot do this unless they know him beforehand. For no one can find something which he is seeking if he is altogether ignorant of it. Thus he says, "Who will grant me the ability to know him, find him, and approach his throne?" For he knew that God exceeded his knowledge, and so he could not find the road perfectly by himself to arrive at God's throne which is the full knowledge of his judgment. He who has been burdened by a judge generally demonstrates the justice of his cause to him when he comes into his presence. So he says, "I will put judgment before him," as if to say: I will propose what ought to be the just judgment of my cause. "I will fill my mouth with rebukes," with loud complaints, but not because I believe that divine judgment is unjust, but only as someone making an inquiry. This is like debaters usually make objections against the arguments of their opponents, to understand the truth more fully, and so he says, "to know how he answers me." This relates to knowing the truth of the answer. "To understand what he says to me," relates to the understanding the sense of the words. For man cannot know whether something is true which is said to him unless he understands what is said to him.

In the previous chapter Job's friends had frequently referred to divine power and grace as if to sustain divine judgment. As Sophar said in Chapter Eleven, "He is higher than the heavens and what will you do?" (v.8) and the other things which follow there. So he excludes this objection when he says, "I do not want him to argue with me with his great strength, nor crush me with the greatness of his power," as if to say: Your answer in which the power and greatness of God are proposed against me alone does not satisfy me. Since just as he is most powerful and the greatest, so he is also the most just and loves equity. So he then says, "Let him propose fairly what he has against me," that is, let him give an explanation which is based on equity, and it will be clear then that I have not been punished for malice. So he says, "and my claim will be victorious," in which I argue against you maintaining I am not punished for my sins.

Lest someone think that he said, "Who will give me the ability to know him, find him, and approach his throne?" (23:3) because he believed that God was closed in a corporeal place or could be known sufficiently through creatures, he then says, "If I go to the East, he does not appear." Consider that according to Aristotle there are six different positions in the heavens: up and down, right and left, and anterior and posterior. The principle of motion of the whole firmament appears clearly in the East. The beginning of motion in each animal is from the right. If, therefore, we imagine the motion of the firmament as the motion of an animal, it is necessary to place the right side of heaven in the East, the left in the West, up to the South and down to the North, anterior in the Northern Hemisphere, and posterior in the Southern Hemisphere as if to say: If we were to imagine a man who with his right hand moves the heaven from the East toward the Northern Hemisphere. The consequence would be that he would hold his head toward the South and his feet to the North, his anterior part would be towards the Northern Hemisphere, the posterior part of the man, his back, towards the Southern Hemisphere. Yet others did not consider the disposition of the human body so much as the order of the motion of the heaven, and placed the higher part of heaven in the Eastern part, because the motion begins there; however, they have put the right part of heaven in the South towards which the motions of the planets move from our perspective. Thus by opposition the lower part of heaven is found in the West, the left part of heaven in the North. The words of Job seem to proceed in this way, for he divides the left and the right opposite the East and the West. So one can simply understand that God is not contained in any part of the heavens as in a place, and so the sense would be, "I go to the East and he is not," that is, a being near there as if he existed there as in a place. "If I go to the West, I will not understand him," as though he were closer, and were contained there, "or if I turn to the left," that is, towards the North, "what will I do? I will not grasp him intellectually," since he is not situated there materially. "If I turn to the right," that is, towards the South, "I will not see him," as though he existed there.

Or these words can be understood not to exclude local presence from God, but to show that he cannot be investigated sufficiently by means of lower effects. Among all the effects apparent in corporeal things, the most universal and the greatest one is the motion of the vault of heaven. Although the principle of this motion clearly appears to be in the East, still the principle of this motion does not sufficiently demonstrate the infinity of divine power, and so he says, "If I go to the East," namely, by the progress of my consideration, as if reflecting on the principle of the motion of the vault of heaven, "he does not appear," sufficiently in this consideration. The second effect of the divine power in corporeal things is the motion of the planets which is contrary to the motion of the vault of heaven. So its beginning is found in the West. One cannot sufficiently consider divine power on the basis of this motion either, and so he continues, "If (understood, to mean "I will turn") to the West," if I go to the West considering the motion of the planets, "I will not understand him." He says this very clearly: this motion is understood more from the difference in place of the planets than in what appears to the eyes. From the northern part there seems to us to be no principle but darkness, because the sun never appears from this part. Darkness impedes action according to John, "Night comes when no one can work," (9:4) and so he says, "If to the left," if I go ahead with my reflection "what will I do?", for I do not find anything there but the absence of action, and so no trace will be given to know him. So he adds, "I will not understand him," in any way at all. In the southern part we find the principle of light because of the luminous bodies which appear to us from that direction, and so he continues, "If I turn," by consideration, "to the right," to the southern part of the sky, "I will not see him," as if to say: I will find corporeal light there, yet he cannot be seen through this. Although he is hidden to me in this way, the things which act about me are not hidden from me, and so he continues, "But he knows my way," the whole course of my life. Job seems to say this against what Eliphaz had said before about the person of evil men as if he had attributed this position to Job, "The clouds are his hiding place and he does not see ours." (22:14)