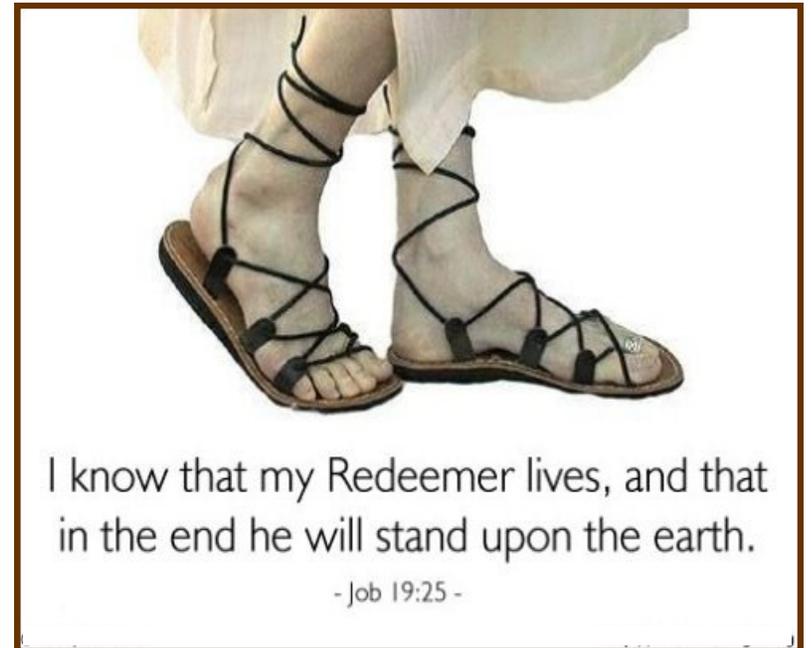


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Job

Chapter Seventeen:



I know that my Redeemer lives, and that
in the end he will stand upon the earth.

- Job 19:25 -

Job Counts on God's Friendship

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 SEVENTEEN: JOB COUNTS ON GOD'S FRIENDSHIP

The First Lesson: Job calls on God

1 My spirit will be weakened, my days will be shortened and nothing remains for me but the tomb. 2 I have not sinned and my eye lingers on bitter things. 3 Free me and place me near you, and do not let the hand of anyone fight against me. 4 You have made their hearts far from learning, yet they will not be lifted up. 5 He promises plunder to his companions and the eyes of his sons will fail. 6 He has set me up as a proverb to the people and his example in their midst. 7 Anger misted over my vision with indignation and my limbs are reduced to almost nothing. 8 The just will be astonished at this and the innocent will arouse himself against the hypocrite. 9 The just will preserve his course and add courage to pure hands.

Job had shown above the great number of his afflictions, (16:14) the humiliation of his mind, (16:16) the innocence (16:18) and the brevity of a life definitively lost, (16:23) and by which the wordiness of his friends is conclusively proved. In this chapter then he intends to prove the premises and finally conclude their ignorance. (v.10) First he begins to prove what he had said about the process of human life, and he presents beforehand the cause of the shortness of life, when he says, "My spirit will be weakened." For the life of the body is lived through vital spirits which are diffused from the heart to all its members. The body lives as long as they are strong in the body. But when the natural caloric power (energy) begins to grow weak in the heart, such spirits grow less. By this growing less and debilitation he, of course, means the weakening of the spirit. He then states the effect of this cause saying, "my days will grow shortened." For weakness of the vital spirit shortens the days of life. To answer the objection that a spirit once weakened would again be strengthened again according to kind of existence of this mortal life, he says, "nothing remains for me but the tomb," as if to say: Once the span of this present life is finished, nothing of this present life remains for me except the grave and those things which befit the grave.

From these things he concludes as though deducing an unfitting conclusion saying, "Where then now is my hope?" as if to say: If I were to find my consolation because of the expectation of temporal prosperity, my hope would be vain. Again he concludes to a greater absurd conclusion saying, "and who appreciates my suffering?" as if to say: Even though I hold up patiently, nothing still remains but the grave and its darkness, corruption and maggots. If then I should have patience to merit temporal goods from God, it would follow that God did not regard my patience, which is to deny providence. Against the objection that perhaps he would be given temporal prosperity by God even in the grave, he then says almost jeeringly, "Into the last depths of hell will all of my possessions descend," since whatever is mine will be lowered into the grave which is all that remains for me. "Do you think that at least there I will have rest," i.e. should I also expect earthly prosperity even there? This is clearly ridiculous.

END OF JOB CHAPTER 17

In this he really intends to show their stupidity when they promised the consolation of temporal prosperity to him. (5:15, 8:6, 11:17) He first proposes against their promises that the time of his life has already in great part elapsed, and he therefore says, "my days have passed away." Then he shows the evils which he suffers when he continues, "my thoughts have been utterly scattered," for they are impeded from the quiet contemplation of wisdom because of the bitterness of my bodily pain. So he then says, "they torture my heart," because his thoughts are led away from the sweet contemplation of truth to the bitterness which tortured his heart. This torture of the heart was not even interrupted by night which is the time set aside for man's rest, and so he then says, "They have turned night into day," because of the reflection previously mentioned he spent the night in insomnia as though it were day. It is more painful to suffer the loss of sleep at night than during the day, because during the day the soul of man is lightened by the company of men and by the sight of daylight. So as long as night was sleepless for him he desired that it end quickly. He explains this saying, "I again hope for the light after the darkness," that is, I hope that the light of day will come again after the darkness of night.

But since Eliphaz had invited him to tolerate all his adversities patiently for future expectation, he shows as a consequence what seems to be left to him in the future on the part of temporal things. So he says, "If I am patient," that is patiently bear all such pains, nothing remains for me but the dwelling of the grave, and he expresses this saying, "my home is in the lower regions." He calls the grave the lower regions according to the opinion of those against whom he is disputing, who did not believe that the soul of man survives after death but that only the body remains in the grave, which they called lower regions because it was situated in the depths of the earth (*infernus*). Man lying in the grave suffers darkness both because of the lack of sensation and also because of the lack of exterior light, and so he then says, "In darkness I have arranged my couch." As a man who takes his origin when he is born from his parents by reason of which he establishes an affinity with them, so after death, lying in the grave he is dissolved into corruption and maggots which are born from his body, and so he then says, "I have said to corruption: You are my father; and to the maggots, you are my mother, and my sister," as if to say: There will remain to me an affinity in the grave with no other temporal thing except corruption and maggots.

Then he shows their consolation to be vain in another way. For they consoled him saying sin was the cause of such adversities coming on him, and that if he repented then he would return to prosperity. But he rejects this saying, "I have not sinned," because he did not have the remorse of conscience about any grave sin for which he had incurred such great adversities, thus he even says later in the text, "For my heart has not accused me in my whole life." (27:6) Thus this is not against what is said in 1 John, "If we have said we have no sin, we lie to ourselves." (1 John 1:8) By this he explains what he had said above about his innocence, "I have suffered these things without having evil on my hand." (16:18) He then says, "and my eye lingers on bitter things." He uses the plural, "bitter things" because of the many adversities which he had enumerated above. He says, "lingers" because although he has humbled himself among bitter things and sewn up a sack over his skin, (16:16), the bitter things nevertheless remain. He attributes bitter things to the eye because of the weeping they cause, which he already expressed saying, "My face was puffed up from weeping," (16:17) and again, "my eye pours out for God," (16:21) because his eye was weeping among the bitter things so that it aimed only at divine help, and that is why he continues here, "Free me." For Job understood that he alone could free him who placed him in the power of the evil one. (16:12) Truly he was not praying to be freed from adversity like those who would procure earthly prosperity after the adversity, but he prayed to be led to high-mindedness, and so he then says, "and place me near you." For since God is the very essence of good, it is necessary that he who is placed close to God, be freed from evil. Man is placed near to God insofar as he approaches him with his mind through knowledge and love, but this happens imperfectly in the state of a sojourner on earth in which man suffers attacks. Because he is placed near to God, however, he is not overcome by them. Man is perfectly placed near to God in his mind in the state of ultimate happiness in which he cannot suffer attacks, and he shows he desires this saying, "do not let the hand of anyone fight against me," because no matter how much someone would want to attack me, if I were placed perfectly near to you, no one's attack will disturb me. This is then the expectation Job had for his consolation in the midst of bitter things, hoping to be placed near to God where he could not fear attacks.

The Second Lesson: Job Ridicules his Friends

10 Therefore, all of you, convert and come, and I will not find one wise man among you. 11 My days have passed away and my thoughts have been utterly scattered. They torture my heart. 12 They have turned my night into day, and I hope again for the light after the darkness. 13 If I am patient, my home is in the lower regions; in darkness I have arranged my couch. 14 I have said to corruption: You are my father; and to the maggots: You are my mother, my sister. 15 Where then now is my hope and who appreciates my suffering? 16 Into the last depths of hell will all of my possessions descend; do you think that at least there I will have rest?

After Job presented the arguments by which he refuted the opinion of Eliphaz, he collects here what he has said and orders it to demonstrate his thesis. First, he gets their attention saying, "Therefore" since what I have said is true, "all of you," you and your fathers, who have arrayed yourselves against me, "convert" from your errors, "and come" to consider the truth. Once you have ascertained the truth it will be clear to you how far you are from true wisdom. Therefore he says, "and I will not find one wise man among you." He says this to curb the boast of Eliphaz above, when he said, "what do you know that we do not." (15:9 ff.) and "Wise man know what they have learned from their father." (15:18 ff.)

The prattling friends of Job did not understand this spiritual consolation of Job, and so he then says, "You have made their hearts far from learning," from your spiritual teaching through which you teach one to hope for spiritual goods and to hold temporal goods in contempt. Since they only place their hope in things weak and time bound, they cannot arrive at spiritual height and be placed near to God. He therefore express this saying, "yet they will not be lifted up." From the fact that they were placed far from spiritual teaching, he concludes that Eliphaz promises only temporal goods to Job as a consolation, (5:18) and he expresses this saying, "He promises plunder to his companions," that is, the procurement of temporal goods which can only come to one person if another loses. So the acquisition of temporal goods is likened to plundering. It is not universally true that after repentance men recover temporal prosperity, since even the good do not always enjoy temporal prosperity, and so then he says, "the eyes of his sons will fail." He calls his sons those who believe his promise, hope for temporal rewards for the goods which they do, but when they do not attain them their eyes fail, like those ceasing from their hope. Just as Eliphaz promised temporal goods to those doing good, so also he asserted that all temporal adversities come about because of the sins of the one who suffers them. Since Job had suffered many adversities, Eliphaz uses him as an example to the people, and as he expresses this saying, "He has used me as a proverb to the people and his example in their midst." This is because to prove his opinion about the cause of adversities he used Job as an example, presuming he was punished for sin.

However it is characteristic of the zeal of the just to be indignant when they see the righteousness of divine judgments perverted by false doctrine. So Job consequently shows the greatness of his zeal in two ways: first, by a kind of disturbance of the mind. "Vicious anger blinds the eye, but zealous anger troubles the eye," as Gregory says. So he then says, "My vision," the sight of my reason, the concentration of which is disturbed by zealous anger, "has misted over in indignation." Second, zealous anger also produces excitement in the body through distress. Thus the text of Maccabees says that Mathathias seeing the Jews sacrifice to idols, "felt anguish and he violently trembled in the depth of his passions." (1 Macc. 2:23-24) So he adds here, "My limbs are reduced to almost nothing" so much does the body of man seem to pine away from distress. One could think that this misting of sight is against justice and this anger against innocence. So to reject this he then says, "the just will be astonished at this," as if to say: The just are rightly astonished when they see the doctrine of evil men, and above he called this astonishment misting over. The text continues "and the innocent will arouse himself against the hypocrite," saying in effect: It is not against innocence if someone is roused in anger against the hypocrite who perverts true doctrine from a zeal for justice, and since, as has been said, zealous anger disturbs the soul but does not blind it, so the just man is astonished or misted over by zeal which does not withdraw from justice. He expresses this saying, "the just will preserve his course," because he does not desert it from zealous anger. Such anger does not precede reason but follows it, and so it cannot separate a man from justice. Zealous anger is useful because it makes a man arise against evils with greater strength of soul. He expresses this saying, "and add courage to pure hands," incited by zeal, and so Aristotle says in the Ethics III that anger aids courage.