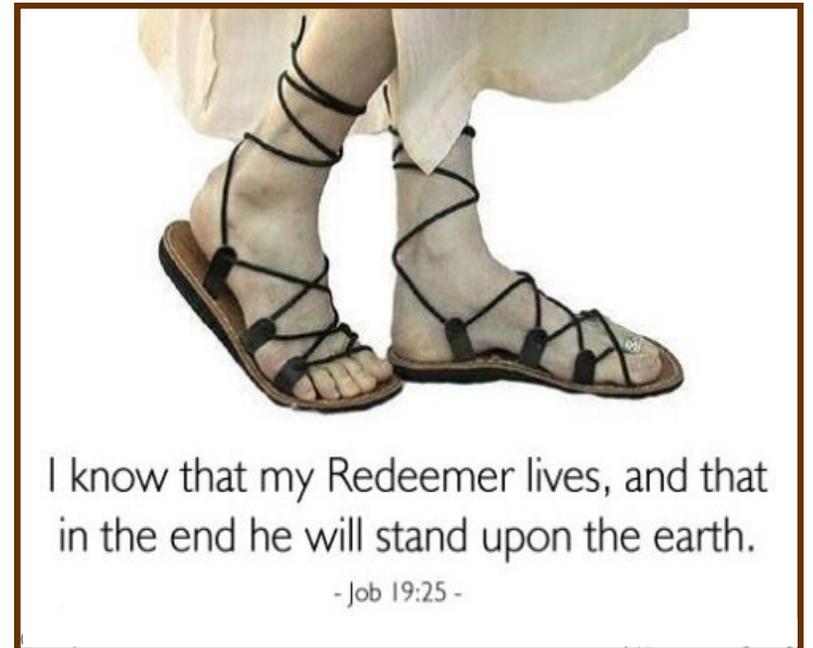


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Job

Chapter Twenty One:



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

- Job 19:25 -

The Second answer of Job to Sophar

*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 ONE: THE SECOND ANSWER OF JOB TO SOPHAR

The First Lesson: The Prosperity of the Wicked is a Fact

1 Job answered saying: 2 Listen, I beseech you, to my words and do penance.
3 Bear with me so that I, too, may speak, and after my words, if it seems right,
laugh. 4 Is my debate against a man so that I should not be sad with merit? 5
Pay attention to me, be astonished and put your finger over your mouth. 6
When I call this to mind, even I am amazed and trembling invades my flesh. 7
Why then do the wicked live, why have they been lifted up and comforted
with riches? 8 Their seed endures in their presence, the crowd of their
neighbors and descendants endure in their sight. 9 Their houses are safe and
peaceful and the rod of God is not on them. 10 Their ox has conceived and
not aborted; the cow has calved and has not been deprived of her young. 11
Their little ones like flocks have come forth and their young dance in play. 12
They play the tambourine and harp and they enjoy the sound of the organ. 13
They spend their days in prosperity, and they go down to Sheol in a moment.
14 They said to God: Depart from us, we do not want knowledge of your
ways; 15 who is the Almighty that we should serve him and what comes to us
if we adore him? 16 Nevertheless, since their own goods are not in their
hands, let their counsel be far from me. 17 Each time the lamp of evil men
goes out, the deluge comes on them and apportions the pains of his wrath. 18
They will be like chaff before the wind and like ash which the whirlwind drives
away. 19 God will save the pain of the father for the sons, and when God
repays, they will not know. 20 His eyes will see their destruction and he will
drink of the fury of the Almighty. 21 For what difference does it make to him
what happens to his house after him? Or if the number of his months will be
cut in half?

***“Nevertheless, since their own goods
are not in their hands,
let their counsel be far from me.”***

So Job has explained his idea in a gradual order, first showing in Chapter Nineteen (v. 25) that the hope of the just tends to reward of the future life. Here he expresses the opinion that punishment is reserved for evil men after death, and so from both sides, after refuting the opinion of his adversaries he says, "How can you then console me in vain?" by promising temporal prosperity, "when your answer has been shown to be contrary to the truth?" in that you say rewards and punishments are assigned to men in this life, which has been disproved above in many ways.

END OF JOB CHAPTER 21

In the preceding chapter Sophar had already consented to the opinion of Job, at least in part. He had affirmed that sins were punished after death, although he still retained in this his own opinion that sins were also punished temporally in this life. For this reason Job has some hope of converting them completely to the true opinion. So he first humbly invites his friends to pay attention when he says, "Listen, I beseech you, to my words." Since up to this time they had heard his words with some mockery, he says then, "and do penance," about the fact that you have jeered at my words or have contradicted the truth. As you have all spoken now twice, "Bear with me so that I may speak," answering those things which were last proposed to me. So that they make no judgment of condemnation before they heard him he says, "and after my words, if it seems right to you, laugh," as if to say: If you judge this my opinion to be laughable, first listen to my answer; and if that does not satisfy you, you will be able to laugh at me with more justice afterwards. Lest his words will be necessarily condemned, he shows that he is about to speak the great matters of divine judgment and not human judgments. Thus he says, "Is my debate against a man so that I should not be sad with merit?", as if to say: If the intention of my argument was to question whether a man justly or unjustly afflicted me, in whatever way this happened, I would lack sadness with reason. But my intention is to inquire how this has happened by the just judgment of God. Since this disputation is about a great matter, one should listen attentively, and so he says, "Pay attention to me." It should also not be listened to lightly or with scorn, but more with dignity and with amazement, and so he says, "Be astonished." It should also be heard in silence and without murmuring, and so he says, "and put your finger over your mouth." Lest it seem that he speaks boastfully as if giving honor to his own authority, he shows that he also is awed at the high nature of the question, and so he says, "When I call this to mind, even I am amazed," lest I be unfaithful to the truth in any respect in such a great question, or should speak irreverently of divine judgments. That fear does not stop short in the mind, but goes even to the flesh, and so he says, "and trembling invades my flesh": for even the flesh is affected by a violent passion of the soul.

Since these premises were sufficient to call the others to attention, he proceeds to the question. Since Sophar had said (20:5) that the prosperity of evil men, if it happens, ends in a brief time and is changed into evil for them, Job, therefore, disproves this immediately saying, "Why, then, do the wicked live," a long time? As if he should say: If the evil man flies away like the bird or passes quickly like a vision in the night, (20:8) why is it that many evil men have a very long life? In the same way, if "the joy of the hypocrite is like a speck," (20:5) and his ascent is quickly thrown down, why "are they lifted up," that is, promoted to honors? In the same way, if he "vomits the riches which he devoured," (20:15) why are "they comforted with riches," why are their riches maintained for them? Also, against Sophar's statement, "His sons will be reduced to poverty," (20:10) he says, "Their seed endures in their presence," that is, their sons endure, with them looking on. He then says the same thing about other persons related to them saying, "the crowd of their neighbors and descendants endure in their sight." By this he shows a double prosperity, because those closest to him are not taken away in death, which is what he means when he says, "endures," nor are they removed far from him by exile or something of this sort, which is what he means when he says, "in their presence," and "in their sight."

He then pursues in detail the prosperity of the evil men already treated. First, he does so as to themselves, and he begins with immunity from evil when he says, "Their homes," their families, and the necessities of life, "are safe," from the assault of the enemy," and peaceful," without internal dissension. They are also immune from the divine scourge, and with respect to this he adds "the rod of God is not on them," because they are not corrected for their sins in this life. He speaks then about the increase of their goods, since their goods are not barren, nor are they deprived of their fruit. He clearly shows this in the species "ox," for the ancients were very partial to oxen for use in agriculture. Thus he says, "Their ox," that is, their oxen, (bos) "breed," because there is no sterility. Conception comes first in the fertilization of animals, the formation of the fetus conceived in the womb and its gestation to term which is hindered by abortion comes second, and as to this he says, "and has not aborted." Third is birth, and as to this he says, "the cow has calved." (The names ox and cow here mean the same thing, and he uses both, either because of the harmonious phrasing or for the sake of the meter in the verse.) Fourth comes the education of the offspring, and as to this he then says, "and she has not been deprived of her young," by some premature death.

As a consequence he speaks about the prosperity of the sons, and he first places the great number of the offspring when he says, "They have come forth," namely, walking in the streets and not prevented by death. "Their little ones like flocks," in their great number and their mutual concord. Second, he places their well-being when he says, "and their young dance in play," as though they were not complaining about any illnesses. Third, he discusses their instruction as a part of which among the ancients consisted in instructing children in music, and so he says, "They play the tambourine and harp and they enjoy the sound of the organ," for they are taught both to play music well and judge the way others play competently.

After he has demonstrated the evil of their opinion by the things said above, he proceeds to determine the truth. He prefaces this by saying that what he is about to say is not new, but commonly held among most people. He says, therefore, "Ask every passerby," as if to say: I do not have to diligently search for a witness, since it can be had from anyone passing on the street. Or the passers-by could mean those who use this life not as an end, but as a means, "and you will know that he thinks the same thing," which I am about to tell you. So you are without excuse for separating yourselves from the truth which all commonly hold. He explains this truth then saying, "that the wicked man is spared for the day of perdition," as if to say: The fact that he is not punished, but prospers in this life, happens because his punishment is reserved for another time when he will be punished more gravely. So he says, "and he is brought to the day of fury," for since fury is anger aroused, the name wrath denotes a harsher vengeance. He shows why he is saved for the day of perdition and of fury saying, "Who will blame him for his conduct in his presence? And who can repay him for what he did?" Here he gives two reasons, the first of which is that he is of such slight wisdom that he does not even learn from punishments so that he might recognize his own fault, but he murmurs in the midst of the blows as if he were punished unjustly. This is what he means when he says, "Who will blame him in his presence?" so that he recognizes, "his conduct" his evil way? Another reason is that the punishments of this life are not sufficient for the punishment of such great guilt, because if they are harsh they kill the sinner quickly, and this is what he says next, "and who can repay him for what he did," in this life? So he concludes that this day of perdition and the fury previously mentioned is not in this life but after death, for he then says, "He himself will be led to the grave," after he has died. Yet he will live in his soul, and he then expresses this saying, "and he will keep vigil in the gathering of the dead," because although he seems to sleep by the death of his body, he will still keep vigil through the life of his soul. Lest it seem that after death he passes into joy he says, "He was pleasant to the gravel of Cocytus (of the lower world)." For since he had invoked the man-in-the-street as his witness, he proposes the truth about the punishment of evil men after death under the guise of a myth which was commonly told. This myth is that in hell, among other things, there was a river called the Cocytus, a word which is translated as "lamentation," to which the souls of evil men are led. As other rivers drag gravel along, so that river in a certain way carries along the souls of evil men. Thus the evil man is said, "to be pleasant to the gravel of Cocytus," because his association was welcome to evil men, and so he will have a place among evil men who are in lamentations. He then tells what this river produces for men saying, "which drags all men after it," because all men die in some sort of mourning, for what is after death is like the end of that river whose beginning is what is done in this life, and so he then says, "and those before it are without number," because grief seizes most men even in this life.

The opinion of the friends of Job was that the reason for this difference was based on the diversity of merits. This is against the evidence of experience in the fact that some of the evil prosper and some of them suffer adversities. So he quotes their opinion with scorn as already disproved saying, "Certainly I know your thoughts," in which they condemned Job rashly, "and opinions," spoken in exterior words, "which are evil against me," because you accuse me of inequitable impiety based on the adversities which I suffer. So he continues, "For you say: Where is the house of the leader? Where are the tents of the wicked?" as if to say: You fell together with your family from such a great preeminence as the tents of the evil men usually fall.

To answer the objection that their prosperity endures for a little while, or "like a speech", (20:5) he then says, "They spend their days in prosperity," as if to say: All the days of their lives are passed in prosperity. It is necessary that they experience death from the common condition of men in the end, but they still suffer this without undue anguish beforehand, and so he says, "and they go down to Sheol in a moment," in death. For all the ancients before the coming of the Redeemer, about whom he had spoken above, (19:25) descended to the underworld, however some weighed with adversities in life did not immediately descend to Sheol, but only after suffering many bitter things, as Jacob says in Genesis, "Moaning will descend to my son in hell." (37:35) But those who flourished in prosperity until death descend to Sheol as if in a moment.

One could counter that they besides the many evil things which evil men do, they merited earthly prosperity from God either by loving, by knowing, or by serving him in any of their kinds of works, or at least in seeking temporal goods from him. But he rejects this saying, "They said to God," sinning from the intention of the heart as from a certain malice, "Depart from us," which shows a defect of love, "we do not want a knowledge of your ways," which shows a defect of knowledge through affected ignorance. The ways of God are his precepts and his judgments by which we are disposed by him. "Who is the Almighty that we should serve him?" which shows a defect of good works originating from the contempt of God, "and what comes to us if we adore him?" which shows a contempt of prayer because of a defect of hope.

Thus he most clearly refuted their opinion, showing that temporal prosperity is not always the reward of virtue nor temporal adversity the punishment of sin, because evil men frequently prosper in this life although they merit nothing good from God, and with this they suffer no grave adversities. But someone could counter: If prosperity happens to evil men and they lack adversities, then there is, therefore, no reason to avoid evil, and so Qoheleth says, "The same things happen to everyone, and so the hearts of the sons of men are filled with evil." (9:13) But he answers to this objection saying, "Nevertheless, since their own goods are not in their hands, let their counsel be far from me." To understand this one must know that certain goods are in the hand of a man, that is, in his power, namely, the voluntary works of virtue of which he is lord through his free will aided by the grace of God. Thus the virtuous can always retain goods of this kind for as long a time as they wish, and because of this the advice to pursue goods of this kind should be heeded. But the goods of temporal prosperity are not in the power of those who possess them so that they can acquire or keep them when they will. Thus the counsel of those men should be rejected in which they hold God and justice in contempt in order to live prosperously; for by this means they cannot obtain what they intend, but sometimes are pressed with adversities.

Consider further that the adversity of an evil man is worse than that of the just man, because when the just man suffers temporal adversity, the support of virtue and the consolation in God remains to him. So he is not totally overthrown. But no support remains for evil men once they have lost the temporal goods which they sought exclusively. So he then says, "Each time the lamp," the prosperity, "of evil men goes out," ends, "and the deluge," the grave storm of adversity, "comes on them," by divine judgment, "and," each time God, "apportions," distributes in a determined measure, "the pains," certain afflictions, "of his wrath," caused by his fury, "they," evil men, "will be like chaff before the wind," which cannot resist the wind because of lightness, "and like ash," which remain when wood is burned, "which the whirlwind drives away," because it does not have moisture to hold itself together. So also when adversity comes, wicked men cannot resist it because they lack the support of divine hope and they are driven away by different thoughts without the moisture of virtue.

After this he speaks about his adversity as to his sons when he says, "God will save the pain of the father for the sons," because the punishment of the father extends to the sons as imitators of the evil of the father. Nor will this be deferred until after the death of the father, but this will happen while the father is alive and knows it, and so he says, "and when he (God) repays" namely, when God renders the punishment to the sons, "then he (the father) will know." So he says, "His eyes will see their destruction," in the destruction of his sons or other kinds of adversity; and in this itself, "he will drink of the fury of the Almighty." For the punishment of the father is that his sons are punished while he lives, and not if they were punished after his death. So he then says, "What difference does it make to him what happens to his house after him?", that is, he will not be afflicted by the future misfortunes of his posterity, especially since the sinner is ignorant of this after his death, as he has said already, "Whether his sons will be noble or base, he is ignorant of the fact." (14:21) "Or," also what difference does it make to him, "if the number of his months is cut in half." He cannot grieve about this in life because he did not know it would happen.

The Second Lesson: Job Strengthens his Opinion

22 Will anyone teach God knowledge, who judges eminent men? 23 One man dies strong, healthy, rich and fortunate. 24 His bowels are full of fat and his bones nourished with marrow. 25 Another dies in bitterness of soul, without any riches. 26 And yet they sleep in the dust in the same way and worms will cover them. 27 Certainly I know your evil thoughts and opinions against me. 28 For you say: Where is the house of the leader? Where are the tents of the wicked? 29 Ask every passerby and you will know that he thinks the same thing, 30 that the wicked man is spared for a day of perdition and he is brought to the day of fury. 31 Who will blame him for his conduct in his presence? And who can repay him for what he did? 32 He himself will be led to the grave and he will keep vigil in a gathering of the dead? 33 He was pleasant to the gravel of Cocytus which drags all men after it and those before it are without number. 34 How can you then console me in vain, when your answer has been shown to be contrary to the truth.

Since Job had established above that evil men sometimes experience prosperous things and sometimes adverse things in this life, which causes doubt, he therefore seeks to resolve this doubt. First he shows that this does not arise from a defect in divine knowledge, as though the evil of those men to whom he gives prosperity escaped his notice. So he says, "Will anyone teach God knowledge?" as if to say: He does not need instruction by anyone about the merits of men to know to whom he should give prosperous things and to whom he should give adverse things. His next statement, "Who judges the eminent," can be interpreted in two ways: in one way God does not stand in need of the instruction of anyone to be able to judge the great, that is, those who prosper in this world, like judges in human affairs need to be instructed by witnesses about the merits of those they are judging. This text can be understood in another way as introduced as a confirmation of the preceding idea. For the fact that God knows all things and he does not stand in need of instruction by anyone is clear because he judges men no matter how great they are. No one judges things of which he is ignorant, and so it cannot be that knowledge of anyone no matter how great may escape his notice.

Therefore, after he has established the sufficiency of divine knowledge, he then introduces material for a doubt which might arise about how he governs human beings in different ways because some are prosperous until their death whereas others die in misery. Temporal prosperity consists first in power, and regarding this he says, "One man will die strong;" second in the health of the body, and regarding this he says, "healthy;" third in a wealth of exterior things, and regarding this he says, "rich;" and fourth in the prosperous success of one's plans and of works, and regarding this he says, "and fortunate." For one is considered really fortunate in the eyes of some when everything succeeds for him according to desire. To show that his riches are not only sufficient, but also superabundant he says, "His bowels are full of fat," for fat is generated by a superabundance of food. Again, he shows his power is based on numerous supports saying, "and his bones are nourished with marrow," for bones show strength because their strength is supported by the nourishment of the marrow. He then speaks about the adversity of other men saying, "Another dies in the bitterness of his soul." This regards the interior pains which men conceive either from bodily harms or from unfortunate events. He adds, "without any riches," to show a defect of exterior things. Yet although men with equal merits are differentiated this way in life, at least after death one cannot maintain that their lot cannot be changed in these things which are different in the disposition of their bodies. For their bodies are disposed equally after death, and so he says, "And yet they will sleep in the dust in the same way," because they will be buried in the earth equally, "and worms will cover them," for their bodies will decay in the same way. So it is clear that no reason for difference among men based of prosperity or adversity in these things which are equal in merit or demerit, can be proved on the basis of the different disposition of bodies after death.