

The Second Lesson: The Promises of His Friends are Vain

21 My wordy friends, my eye pours out for God 22 And would that man were so judged by God as the son of man is judged by his colleague! 23 Behold, the short years pass away and I walk a path by which I will not return.

After Job described the greatness of his adversity, (v.14) his humility (v.16) and his innocence (v.18), he proceeds further to reprove the vain consolation which his friends repeated to him again and again, about the hope of recovering temporal prosperity. As Eliphaz said above, "Is it a great thing for God to console you." (15:11ff) So he intends to show the vain character of this consolation, and he begins with the words, "My wordy friends," as if to say: They promise me empty words. My consolation is not in recovering temporal goods, but in acquiring the enjoyment of God, and expressing this he says, "my eye pours out for God," that is it weeps because of the desire for God, according to Psalm 41, "My tears have been for me my bread by night and day, when I hear it said daily, where is your God?" (v.4) To explain what he had said, he continues, "and would that man were so judged by God as the son of a man is judged by his colleague." For a man is judged by his own colleague when one is actually present to the other and they express their arguments to each other. He desired therefore to be in the presence of God and to know the reasons for the divine works and judgments, by which human happiness consists. His consolation was in this hope, not in the vain words of his friends by which they promised the recovery of temporal prosperity. So to show the vanity of this promise he adds, "Behold! The short years pass away," because "man lives for a short time," as he had said above. (14:1) A great part of Job's lifetime had already passed; and so few years remained for him in which, even if there was prosperity, it would not bring him much consolation because of the shortness of the time. Some men believed that after death man returned again to the course of this present life, and so it could seem possible for Job to be consoled in the hope of recovering earthly prosperity at least in that future life. So to reject this he then says, "and I walk a path by which I will not return." For man in this mortal life tends through the process of aging tends to death, and there cannot be a repetition in this process, so that man would be a boy once again and walk through all ages of this life.

END OF JOB CHAPTER 16



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Job

Chapter Sixteen:



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

- Job 19:25 -

The Answer of Job to Eliphaz

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 SIXTEEN: THE ANSWER OF JOB TO ELIPHAZ

The First Lesson: Job again describes his Trials

1 Then Job answered saying: 2 I have often heard such things. You are all burdensome consolers. 3 When then will these hollow words end? What trouble is there for you if you speak? 4 I myself could also speak like you. Would that your souls were in the place of mine. 5 I would console you with words. I would shake my head over you. 6 I would encourage you with my mouth and I would move my lips and appear to console you. 7 But what am I to do? If I speak, my pain will not be stilled, and if I keep silence, it will not go away from me. 8 Now my pain has oppressed me, and all my limbs have been reduced to nothing. 9 My wrinkles give testimony against me. The slanderer is raised up against my face contradicting me. 10 He has collected his anger against me. He gnashed his teeth against me threateningly. My enemy has fixed me with frightening eyes. 11 They opened their jaws about me, they struck my jaw with their reproaches. They have contented themselves with my punishments. 12 God has confined me with the wicked man and he has surrendered me into the hands of evil men. 13 I, who was the rich man, suddenly have been ruined; He seized the nape of my neck and he broke me in pieces, he has set me up as his target. 14 He encompassed me about with spears, he wounded my loins, he did not spare me and he poured forth my bowels on the earth. 15 He cut me down with wound upon wound, he has seized me like a giant. 16 I stitched a sack over my skin, and I have covered my flesh with ashes. 17 My face was puffed up from weeping, and my eyelids are misty. 18 I suffered these things without iniquity on my hand because I wanted my prayers to God to be pure. 19 Earth, do not cover over my blood, nor let my cry find a hiding place in you. 20 For behold, my witness is in heaven, my conscience is above.

Eliphaz had spoken harshly against Job in his answer, and so Job accuses him of unfitting consolation in the beginning of his speech. First, because both he and his friends frequently repeat the same things and so he says, "I have often heard such things," as if to say: Your speech is always about the same subject. For with different words they really intended to prove the same things, namely, that Job had fallen into adversities because of his sins. So he then says, "You are all burdensome counselors." For the duty of a counselor is to say something by which suffering will be mitigated. Therefore, a burdensome counselor is someone who says things which aggravate the soul more. Yet one could excuse these things if the irritating words were uttered for some use and contained truth or even if they were spoken only briefly in passing. But if someone uses language which is calculated to sadden another falsely, uselessly, and over a lengthy period of time, he seems to be a burdensome counselor. So he says, "When then will these hollow words end?" In saying, "When will these hollow words end," he shows here that they have dwelled for a long time on irritating words. When he says "hollow words", he shows that they were useless and false, because they were without foundation.

From what he has said before about the gravity of his adversity and the greatness of his humiliation, one could surmise that he had recognized in effect the gravity of his sins, and was humbling himself in repentance thinking that he had been afflicted for his own sins. Eliphaz wanted to make this clear saying, "Look among his holy ones; no one is unchangeable." (15:15) Thus to remove this suspicion he says, "I suffered these things without iniquity in my hand." By this he excludes from himself sins of commission. But he then says, "because I wanted my prayers to God to be pure," to exclude from himself the sins of lukewarmness and omission. In this he seems answer what Sophar said above, "If you take away the evil which is on your hand, then you will be able to raise your hands without stain." (11:14) However to disprove the innocence of Job, Eliphaz had already used twice the argument based on the frailty of earthly nature. He had said above "Even those who serve him are not firm, how much more those who dwell in houses of clay." (4:18-19) He had repeated the same thing later saying, "The heavens are not clean in his sight, how much more abominable and useless is man." (15:15) So to reject this he says, "Earth, do not cover over my blood," and he understands here by blood the affliction of his body. Here blood would be covered over if it were shed for crime, for so it would not have any glory. However it would be covered over by the earth if by the accusation of earthly frailty one could presume a preceding fault. If his blood was shed without fault, he had a just complaint against the one who sheds it, as Genesis says, "Behold the voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the earth." (Gen 4:10) This cry would go unnoticed if his complaint seemed unjust, like the one who had been punished for some fault, and so he says, "Nor let my cry find a hiding place in you," so that I would seem from the frailty of the earthly condition to complain unjustly, as though I were punished for faults. It is true that it is difficult for a man to act according to his earthly condition without the evil of mortal sin, yet it is not impossible, with the help of God through grace who is a witness also to our interior purity. Thus he then says, "For behold my witness is in heaven," for the earth cannot cover over my blood because the witness of heaven is greater than the presumption on the frailty of earth. This witness of heaven is fitting because it even investigates the secret intention of conscience, and so he then says, "my conscience is above," as if to say: My cry cannot find a place to hide in the earth below because my conscience is known in heaven.

Job calls to mind all these things about the greatness of his adversity to show that he cannot be the equal of his friends with whom he is arguing, because they were free from adversities of this kind. However Eliphaz had accused him of pride saying, "Why do you puff up your heart? and so on," (15:12ff). This pride was even more detestable than the graver adversities were by which it could have been corrected, as Psalm 34 says against some, "They were dissipated and not filled with remorse." (v.16) Thus as a consequence having described his adversities he shows now his humiliation, first, regarding external dress, he says, "I stitched a sack over my skin," for such a vesture is a sign of humility, as we read about the Ninevites in Jonah 3:5. One wears ashes for the same reason to show one's frailty as Abraham said in Genesis, "I will speak to my God, since I am dust and ashes," (18:27) and so he continues, "I have covered my flesh with ashes." For the text said above that he sat "in a dung heap" (2:8) as a sign of humility. Second he shows his humility by his great weeping. He uses two signs. First, the swelling of the face, when he says, "My face was puffed up from weeping," because the great matter of tears ascends to the head, and swells the face of the weeper. Second he speaks of his vision being obscured, and expressing this he says, "My eyelids are misty," from weeping, for because of the flow of moisture, the sight of the eyes is literally impeded.

He shows in what follows that there is not equality on both sides in this dispute because the friends of Job spoke without being troubled, and so he says, "What trouble is there for you if you speak?" as if to say: You speak for such a long time in deprecating me because you are not troubled by this situation. Job, however, was annoyed. To preclude anyone thinking that ease in argumentation was attributed to the prominence of the friends in knowledge, Job shows that if adversity had not deprived him and he were in the condition of the friends, he would speak with the same confidence. So he says, "I myself could also speak like you," if I were not weighed down with adversity. He wants for them the opportunity to feel the same thing as he does saying, "would that your souls were in place of mine," in that you suffered the adversity I do. He does not say this because of a feeling of hatred or with ill will seeking revenge, but to recall them from the cruel approach they were using in exasperating Job by their words when they realized that similar words would be rough on them if they were spoken to them. So he then says, "I too would console you with words," like those which you used to console me, "and I would shake my head over you," as a sign of compassion or reprobation like you censure me. Also, "I would encourage you with my mouth," lest you should despair in your impatience, "and I would move my lips," to speak, "and appear to console you," by pretending to speak from pity which I had for you, just as you are doing to me.

It would be easy for me to speak like this just as you did if I were in your condition. But now I am impeded by a pain which neither speech nor silence does not take away, and so he continues, "But what am I to do? If I speak, my pain will not be stilled and if I keep silence, it will not go away from me." For there are two kinds of pain. One is interior and is called sadness. This proceeds from the experience of a present evil. The other is external pain and this is pain according to sense, for example a pain which comes from the dissolution of something joined together or something of the sort. The first kind of pain can be taken away by conversation, but not the second. He shows as a result what he understands about this second pain which cannot be taken away by words when he says, "now my pain has oppressed me," i.e. impeded me so that I cannot easily or freely reason like I did before. For when sensible pain is violent, the attention of the soul is distracted and is impeded from the consideration of intellectual things. He shows what he understands about corporeal pain adding, "and all my limbs have been reduced to nothing." This is because all his members were infected with sores as the text says above "Satan afflicted Job with sores which were most loathsome from the sole of his feet to the top of his head." (2:7)

The dissipation of my members not only cause me sensible pain, but it also bears witness against me. For when the friends of Job saw that he was so covered with ulcers, from this they charged that he had sinned grievously because they thought this had happened to him as a punishment for sin. The text continues in this vein, "my wrinkles give testimony against me," for his body is wrinkled from dehydration as a result of weakness as happens also in old age. He shows the manner in which his wrinkles testify against him when he says, "and the slanderer is raised up against my face, contradicting me." Eliphaz had slandered him when he said that he had fallen into this weakness because of sin. (4:7) This could also be explained saying that Job knew by the Holy Spirit that his adversity had been brought on by the devil, although God had permitted it to happen. So whatever he suffered whether in the loss of goods and children, the sores of his own body, or the annoyance caused by his wife and friends, he attributed all this to the devil as instigator. So he calls him a slanderer who has been raised up against his face because he understood that his friends at the instigation of the devil were speaking against him. According to this second Interpretation, the following verse is clearer. "He has collected his anger against me." For the devil seems to have collected his complete anger against Job when he assailed him with every kind of harm. He afflicted me not only in the past; but he also threatens me in the future, and the text speaks about this saying, "and he gnashed his teeth against me threateningly." He uses the imagery of an animal who threatens man by baring his teeth. He says this because Eliphaz had foretold before that evil things would menace him unto death, using the person of the impious man. (15:32) Job however understood that the threats pronounced by the lips of Eliphaz were directed by the devil and so he said that he had growled at him with his teeth.

But Eliphaz not only used threatening words against him by foretelling evil things, but he also rashly judged his deeds, claiming that he was an evil man (15:20) and a hypocrite (15:34). So he then says, "My enemy fixed me with frightening eyes." For one looks at another with gentle eyes when he interprets his deeds in a benign way, but when he interprets his good deeds as evil, then he fixes him with frightening eyes. So he continues, "They spread their jaws about me," i.e. my friends instigated by my enemy. He interprets this saying, "they struck my jaw with their reproaches." For one is said to strike one in the face when he utters a reproach to his face. The friends of Job had uttered many reproaches against him as they rebuked him for many sins. Because just men rejoice about justice when they see sins punished as Psalm 57 says, "The just will rejoice at the sight of vengeance," (v.11), the friends of Job thought themselves just and Job was a sinner. So they rejoiced seeing his punishments almost as though applauding divine justice, and so the text continues, "they have contented themselves with my punishments."

Lest anyone believe that Job was of the opinion that punishments of this kind were inflicted on him by God since he had said he had been afflicted by an enemy as he continues, "God has confined me with the wicked," i.e. the devil, by consigning me into his power. "He has surrendered me into the hands of evil men," who afflicted me by the instigation of the devil with words and deeds. For Job understood that his trials had been inflicted on him by the devil, but God permitted it. He gives an understanding of this in four clear signs. First, because he fell from the greatest prosperity, not little by little as is usually the case in human affairs, but suddenly. It does not seem to have happened by sudden chance, but only by divine ordination. He speaks about this saying, "I, who was the rich man, suddenly have been ruined." By the fact that he says "rich", he shows the abundance of his wealth, but in the fact that he says, "I, the" he shows the glory of his reputation because of which he was recognized by everyone. The second sign is that he was utterly struck down. He refers to this when he says, "he seized the nape of my neck and he broke me in pieces." He uses the image of a very strong man who seizes a weak man by the nape of the neck, breaks it, and so completely takes his life away. For just so it seemed Job has completely lost his prosperity. The third sign is that he was not oppressed with one adversity, but many all at once as was recounted above. (cf. cc. I and II) He expresses this saying, "He has set me up as his target," which is set up to be hit by different arrows. Here he describes the great number of his trials using three images. First, he shows that he was wounded exteriorly in his possessions saying, "He encompassed me about with his spears." For exterior things encircle us as something extrinsic to us. Thus a man is encompassed with the spears of adversity when he loses exterior goods. Second, he says that he is persecuted interiorly in the affliction of his person. He expresses this saying, "He wounded my loins," as if to say: I have not only been wounded round about me, but my wounds penetrate even to my inner parts where I find enjoyment which are signified by loins. "The loins" may refer to the place we experience pleasure or the origin of generation. So this reference to the loins can also mean his crushed children. Moreover he expresses the great number of the blows from the intensity of the wound when he says, "he did not spare me," by taking away his hand which struck the blow so that I would not be wounded more deeply. Rather, he wounded me very deeply. He expresses this saying, "and he poured forth my bowels on the earth," because he crushed to death all my sons and daughters in one blow. Third, he shows the great number of blows which he has suffered in his own person, and so he then says, "he cut me down," in my own person, "with wound," i.e. with a very grave ulcer, "upon wound," coupled with the deaths of his children. The fourth sign is that he can apply no cure to or resistance against his tribulation because it proceeded from divine providence, reflecting what he said already, "The God whose anger none can resist..." (9:13) He expresses this saying, "he has seized me like a giant," whom a weak man cannot resist because of his great strength. All these signs can be understood either about God who confined him or in a better sense about the evil one, the devil, with whom he was confined.