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Job

Chapter Thirty Four:



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

- Job 19:25 -

Discourse on Divine Justice

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 THIRTY FOUR: DISCOURSE ON DIVINE JUSTICE

The First Lesson: God is Just to the Individual

1 Publicly then, Eliud said these things: 2 Hear my words wise man, and you learned men, hear me. 3 For the ear proves the argument and the palate judges the taste of food. 4 Let us choose what is right for us and among ourselves let us determine what is better. 5 Since you have said, Job: I am a just man and God is overturning my cause. 6 In judging me, there is a lie and my arrow is violent without sin. 7 What man is like Job? Who drinks derision like water, 8 who walks with those who do evil and walks with evil men. 9 For he said: A man will not please God even if he has run with him. 10 Therefore, prudent men, hear me. Let impiety be far from God and evil from the Almighty. 11 For he will render the works of man to him and he will render to each according to his ways. 12 Truly God will not condemn in vain, nor the Almighty overthrow his judgment. 13 What other has he constituted on earth? Or whom did he place over the world which he has fashioned? 14 If he turns his heart to him, he will draw his spirit and his breath to himself. 15 All flesh will be destroyed together and man will return to ashes. 16 If then you have an intellect, hear what is said and perceive the voice of my eloquence. 17 Can one who does not love judgment be healed? How can you condemn one who is just to such a degree? 18 Who says to the King: Apostate? 19 who calls army leaders wicked, 19 who does not discriminate in favor of princes and did not know the tyrant when he disputes against the poor man: for they are all the work of his hands. 20 They will die suddenly, and in the middle of the night, the people will be moved aside, and they will pass away and take the violent man away without aid. 21 For his eye is on the ways of men and he considers all their steps. 22 There is no darkness nor the shadow of death where those who do evil can hide. 23 There is no more ability in man that he should come to God in judgment.

After Eliud accused Job of the fact that he wanted to dispute with God, he enters into the dispute against two things which he had referred to already. (33:9-12b; 35:1) First, he argues against the fact that he interpreted Job to have said that divine judgment was unjust. Since this subject is exceedingly difficult and sublime, he is not content in this argument to address his words only to Job, especially since he was thinking that Job was erroneous in this matter, but he invokes wise men to judge this thing. Some men attain wisdom by themselves, and expressing this he says, "Hear my words, wise men;" but others are instructed about what pertains to wisdom, and as to those he says, "and you learned men," who are taught by others, "hear me." He shows why he invites others to listen saying, "for the ear proves the argument," as if to say: I invite you to listen so that after you have heard my words you judge them. He introduces this as a comparison when he says, "and the palate judges the taste of food," as if to say: Just as taste judges food, so hearing judges words. He shows what these words pertain to when he says, "Let us choose what is right for us," as if to say: Let us judge from the common consensus what is more true, "and among ourselves let us determine what is better," what Job has said or what I am about to say against him.

But lest Eliphaz seem to have said this because he doubted his own justice and the truth of his words, he consequently intends to assert that Job lacks both wisdom and understanding, and because of this he judges him unworthy to debate with him. The opponent in a disputation must have the sharpness of understanding required especially to find reasonable ways to prove his proposition. So he says, "Let intelligent men speak to me," and make objections against me. The other part of the debate belongs to the one answering who must especially have the wisdom required to judge well about the things which he heard and so he says, "and let wise man hear me," for I am an opponent ready to discuss. He had inferred a defect in these two things in the words Job himself spoke, and so he says, "Job has spoken stupidly," against wisdom, insofar as he reckoned Job had said something against the righteousness of divine judgment, "and his words do not show discipline," which is a characteristic of an ordered intelligence. He seems to relate this to the fact that Job asserted that he was just.

Since Job did not recognize those defects in himself, Eliud turns his words to God, requesting that Job be tried to recognize his defects, and so he says, "My Father," O God whom I think of like a father because of the reverence which I have for you and defend your justice in all things, "Let Job be tried," let his defect be shown to him through scourges, "even to the end," until death. He shows the justice of this petition saying, "Do you desist from testing the man of iniquity," as if to say: His evil merits that the scourges never cease. He says with greater exaggeration, "Who in addition to all his sins," to the past sins for which he has been scourged, "adds blasphemy," in saying he is just, but God is unjust. For this he first desires punishment for him in the present, and so he says, "let him be bound among us meanwhile," with adversities. Second, he implies future punishments, and so he says, "and then," after he has already suffered temporally, "to judgment," of future revenge, "let him provoke God by his speeches," by which he blasphemes against him.

END OF JOB CHAPTER 34

There is another punishment of the multitude besides grief in which the dominion of tyrants afflicts them. He expresses this punishment saying, "And over people and all men," as if to say: He exercises his judgments through grief or oppression of tyrants not only in one nation, but also to everyone. He then says about the oppression of tyrants, "he makes a hypocrite reign because of the sins of the people," who are afflicted under his regime. In this he seems to answer the question which Job had proposed, "Why do the wicked live? Why have they been comforted and raised up with riches?" (21:7) For he asserted that this was not because of their own merits, as Job had proved in the same place, but because of lack of merit of others who are punished as a result of their prosperity.

Therefore, after he shows there cannot be injustice in God, and that his justice is especially manifest by the judgments which he exercises on princes and the multitude, he gives Job a chance to answer. So he says, "Since, then, I have spoken about God," in those things which concern the honor of God, "I also will not prohibit you," and give you a chance to respond. He shows in what direction his answer should go saying, "If I have erred," as you imputed to your other friends, when you said that they were "cultivators of false dogmas," (13:4) "you teach me," the truth that I can be free from error. One can be mistaken in speech not only by erring against the truth of doctrine, but also in a particular judgment against the truth of justice, and so he says, "If I have spoken evil, I will not add anything further," showing he is ready for correction. Since he thought that Job was gravely disturbed against him, he shows as a consequence that his disturbance is not justified, continuing, "Does God seek it from you?" as if to say: Even if I have spoken evil, you are not bound by God to answer for it, and so you should not be gravely disturbed by this. He says, "because you were unhappy?" through a disordered disturbance of soul. Second, he shows why he should not be gravely disturbed by it, since Job himself had begun his speech with, "Let the day perish and so on." (3:3) This was the beginning of the whole argument, and so he says, "for you began to speak and not I." Third, he shows that he should not be gravely disturbed because he also has ability to say what he likes, and so he says, "If you know something better" than what I have said, "speak," to show my error or evil.

Therefore, he proposes the argument of Job saying them, "since you have said, Job: I am a just man." He had said this already, "I will not desert my justification which I have begun to have." (27:6) Further he had shown his justice clearly in many things above in Chapter Thirty One. Eliud continues, "and God is overturning my cause." Eliud takes this to be the same as what Job had said in Chapter Twenty Seven, "Long live God who has rejected my cause," (v.2) and the same seems to pertain to what he had said in Chapter Nineteen, "God did not afflict me with right judgment." (v.6) Eliud interprets these words in the worst sense. For Job had said that his cause had been rejected not because he thought that punishments were inflicted on him not by a judgment of one who punishes a fault, but as justice according to providence with a view to proving his justice, and so he had said, "He will prove me like gold which passes through fire." (28:10) One who does not use a judgment does not take away right judgment, but only the one who pronounces judgment unjustly. So he interpreted what Job said, "God took away my judgment," (27:2) as if he said: God has ruined my cause by judging me unjustly, and so he adds, "In judging me there is a lie," a falsity of judgment, which Job had never maintained. But Eliud believed that his intention in the words he referred to was to say that he had been punished unjustly. Therefore, Eliud had conceived this opinion because he did not see how someone could be afflicted without sin unless this was done unjustly. Since Job had said that he was without sin, he thought Job was of the opinion that he was struck by God in violence against justice. So he says, "and my arrow is violent without sin," as if Job had said: Since I am without sin, the arrow with which God wounded me, the adversity he sent, was violent and unjust. This seems to allude to the words of Job spoken already, "The arrows of the Lord are in me." (6:4)

After Eliud had laid this perversity on Job himself, he begins to reprimand him about this saying, "What man is like Job?" as if to say: There is no one like him who seems to be as perverse as he is. For it seemed the greatest perversity when someone laughs at God by disparaging his judgments, and so he says, "who drinks derision," the derision and reproving of divine judgments, "like water." This is drunk easily and for refreshment, as if he imputes to him the crime that what bursts forth as an affront to God, was for him the cooling of his tribulation and he was doing this without the contradiction of his conscience reproving him for it. It is characteristic of those who want to persevere in their sins to condemn divine judgments, and so he says, "who walks," that is, consents, "with those who do evil," who despise divine judgments. Moreover, men acting against the piety of divine religion not only despise divine judgments, but also deny them or assert that they are unjust. He believed that Job was one of them, and so he says, "and he walks with evil men," who cast aside the piety of divine religion. He shows why he asserts that he consents with them saying, "For he said: A man will not please God even if he has run with him," even if he had followed him in the way of justice. Job did not say this, but Eliud takes his words in a sense they were never intended to impute this charge to him. For Job had said, "My feet followed his steps," (23:11) and later, "You have changed into someone cruel in my opinion and you persecute me with a heavy hand." (30:21) From these words he concluded that Job thought that he was displeasing to God, even though he had followed him, but Job referred these words to exterior persecution, not to interior reprobation.

Since, then, Eliud abused the words of Job and was eager to impose on him what he himself did not think or had not expressed in his words, it is clear that the whole subsequent discussion was not against Job. Yet since Eliud thought Job was of such great perversity that he reckoned the judgment of God to be unjust, he scorned him as unworthy to challenge him to a dispute on this subject, but calls on other wise men to decide the question, and so he says, "Therefore, prudent men," you who understand, "hear me." For as the heart is the principle of corporeal life, so the intellect is the principle of the whole intellectual life, and so he used the heart above for the intellect saying, "I have a heart just like yours." (12:3)

In his argument Eliud first proposes what he intends to prove, namely, that there cannot be injustice in divine judgment. For God is himself the one to whom the worship of piety is due, and through his omnipotence he governs all things, establishing for men the laws of justice. Therefore it would be against his divinity if he were to favor impiety, and so he says, "Let impiety be far from God." It would also be against the rule of his omnipotence if he would stoop to injustice, and so he says, "and (let) evil (be far) from the Almighty." After he rejects divine injustice, he shows the manner of divine justice saying, "For he will render the work of a man to him," because he bestows good and evil on him according to his deeds. Since some of those who do good things do them better than others, and some of those who do evil deeds sin more than others, he then says, "and he will render to each one according to his ways," to those who are better, better things; to those who are worse, worse things.

He shows why they are destroyed in the night from the fact that although they could see what they must do, they despised it, and therefore, it is just that they are not given the ability of foreseeing the evils threatening them to provide against them. He expresses this saying, "As evil men," who reject the knowledge of piety, "he has stricken them," who live "in the place of those who see," which is the state in which they can see, both by natural reason and by sacred doctrine, what must be done and what must be avoided. But they themselves have rejected this and so he says, "who have departed from him almost on purpose," from God in sinning from certain malice. He therefore posits that there is affected ignorance in them when he then says, "and they did not wish to understand all of his ways," the commandments of God, and so it is clear that they are not excused because of ignorance but because they are more worthy of condemnation. He shows the effect of affected malice of this kind adding, "or cause the cry of the poor to come to him," as if to say: They show themselves to be so ignorant of the ways of God that they oppress the poor whom God hears. So just as they do not shudder in horror at the oppression of the poor, in the same way they do not fear the anger of God, and so he says, "and he hears the voice of the poor," as if to say: They trivialize the fact that God shows his will is to hear the poor.

Since Eliphaz had attributed the grief of many men to divine judgment, someone, however, could think that the fact that a great number is destroyed and others prosper was not a result of divine judgment, but a result of some powerful prince who governs or attacks them. So to exclude this he says, "For if he grants peace, who will condemn him?" as if to say: Therefore I say he is the one who "destroys many without number." (v.24) For if he willed to grant them temporal peace and prosperity there is no one who can condemn the multitude, and visa versa, if he intends to condemn it, there is no one who can grant peace. So he says, "If he hides his face," by taking away the presence of his consolation, "who will contemplate him," who can find consolation in him as if by seeing his beauty?

The Second Lesson: God punishes the People

24 He will destroy many without number and he will make others take their places. 25 For he knows their works and for that reason he will bring about the night and they will be destroyed. 26 He strikes them as evil men in the place of those who see, 27 who have departed from him almost on purpose and did not wish to understand all his ways, 28 so that they cause the cry of the poor to come to him and he heard the voice of the poor. 29 For if he grants peace, who will condemn him? If he hides his face, who will contemplate him? 30 And over the people and all men, he makes a hypocrite reign because of the sins of the people. 31 Since then I have spoken about God, I also will not prohibit you. 32 If I have erred, you teach me. If I have spoken evil, I will not add anything further. 33 Does God seek it from you, because you were unhappy. For you began to speak and not I. If you know something better, speak. 34 Let intelligent men speak to me, and let a wise man hear me. 35 Job has spoken stupidly and his words did not show discipline. 36 My Father, let Job be tried even to the end, do not desist from testing the man of iniquity. 37 who, in addition to all his sins, adds blasphemy. Let him be bound among us meanwhile and let him provoke God by his speeches at the judgment.

There are two reasons why men especially deviate from justice. The first is because they defer to important persons. The second is because they defer to the majority against justice. He had shown already (vv. 18-23) the perfection of divine justice in that God did not defer to important people, and so now as a consequence he shows it does not defer to the majority of people who are sinners either. So he says, "He will destroy many," sinners, by killing or punishing them in other ways. To preclude one from believing that divine justice goes out to some determined quantity of the multitude and does not go further he then says, "without number," as if to say: Those whom the justice of God destroys because of sins cannot be contained in a determined number. Against the opinion that the human race perishes utterly from this he says, "and who will make others take their places," since others take the place of those who have died, and others are raised up for those losing prosperity, to preserve in this way a certain stability in the human race. Usually when many must be punished the judges cannot examine the cases of each one with great care. Lest this be believed about God, he says, "for he knows their works," what each one deserves. Therefore, he gives to each one according to his works, and so he says, "for that reason he will bring about the night," that is, sudden and unexpected adversity, "and they will be destroyed," unexpectedly.

He proves there is no injustice in God first from the fact that if God were unjust, one would not find justice anywhere, since the universal judgment of all men pertains to him, and so he says, "What other has he constituted on the earth?" as if to say: Is it to be believed that someone was constituted by God to judge all the earth justly if he is evil? Thus he says that one should not believe there is someone else to judge the earth because the same person is the maker and the governor of the earth. So, just as he did not commit the making of the world to anyone else, so he did not give the governing of the world to anyone else, and he expresses this saying, "Or whom did he place over the world which he has fashioned?" as governor of the whole world. He implies the answer is "No one," because just as he has fabricated the world by himself, so also he himself governs and judges the world by himself. True he has executors of his government like ministers, but he himself is the orderer of all. It is not possible for the governing of the whole world be unjust in any way.

Second, he shows by experience that there is no violence or evil in God. For so great is his power by which he conserves things in being, that if he should wish to use violence against his justice, he could immediately annihilate all men. So he says, "If he (God) should turn to him (to destroy man) his heart (his will) his spirit (his soul) and breath (the life of the body supported by the soul) he will draw to himself," separating it from the body by his power. This agrees with the last chapter of Qoheleth, "And the Spirit will return to God who gave it." (12:7) When the spirit has been taken away which was divinely given to man, the consequence is that the corporeal life fails, and so he says, "All flesh will be destroyed together," for the species of flesh will cease, and will be resolved into its component parts. So he then says, "and man will return to ashes," as Psalm 103 says, "You take back their spirit and they will fail and will return to dust." (v. 29) He calls the dust into which flesh is dissolved ashes, either because among the ancients the bodies of the dead were dissolved to ashes by being burned with fire, or because those things into which the dead body is dissolved are a certain residue which springs from the natural heat in the human body. Since, then, it is so easy for God if he wills to reduce the whole of the human race into ashes, it appears from the conservation itself of man that he does not use unjust violence with them.

Since Eliud thought these arguments were sufficient, he invites Job to their consideration when he then says, "If then you have an intellect," to understand the power of my arguments, "hear what is said," with the exterior ears, "and," with interior attention, "perceive the voice of my eloquence," to recognize the justice of divine judgment. He induces him to avoid harming himself or do something to help himself when he says, "Can one who does not love judgment be healed?" as if to say: You who need healing, because you are crushed by many illnesses, cannot be healed unless you love the divine judgment. He rejects Job's opinion which he thought was about the injustice of the divine judgment using many evident indications of divine justice, and so he says, "How can you condemn the one who is just," God, as this appears in many things, "to such a degree," that you say he is a subverter of justice. He commends divine justice by first assuming that God does not respect the persons of the powerful, but he accuses them and punishes them for their sins. Among human powers, royal power is preeminent, and as to this he first says, "Who (God) says to the king: Apostate!" because he is not afraid to accuse a king of apostasy from his oath in which he promises he will preserve justice. In the second place he puts the generals of armies, about whom he says, "who calls army leaders wicked," as if to say: He is not afraid to accuse them of cruelty. In the third place he puts the rulers of cities when he says, "who does not discriminate in favor of the princes," so that he does not accuse and judge them for their sins. In the fourth place he speaks about tyrants who do not enjoy legitimate authority, but have usurped power, and as to them he says, "he did not know (approve) the tyrant (by deferring to him) when he (the tyrant) disputed against the poor man," as if to say: He does not favor the strong against the weak, which expresses his justice. He then says why he does not defer to them, "for they are all the work of his hands," both great and small, and therefore he does not despise the little people but loves them as his own works, nor does he fear the strong, since they are subject to his power.

To answer the possible objection that God only accuses the powerful and does not punish them further, he continues with their twofold punishment. First, death overcomes them unexpectedly, and so he says, "They will die suddenly," as Isaiah says, "Suddenly, when it is not expected, his grief will come." (30:13) For if death overcame them in the usual way as expected, this would not be attributed to divine judgment, but to secondary causes. Second, he places the punishment of the rebellion of their subjects, through which they lose power, and so he says, "and in the middle of the night the people will be moved aside," for the peoples subject to princes and kings suddenly swerve by some hidden plot to revolt against their leaders, and so he says, "and they will pass away." changing lordship, "and they will take away," they will depose from rule or even kill, "the violent man," i.e. he who bore violence to his subjects by despising justice, "without the aid," of armed men. For when a prince is deposed by foreigners, he must have an armed force against him, but when his own subjects in whom his whole power consisted suddenly desert him, he seems that he is born away without an armed band. Although even this can refer to the punishment of the peoples, the first interpretation is better because he speaks now about the justice which God exercises over the great, and then he will speak about the justice which God exercises towards peoples. (v.24) He shows that punishments like this are caused by divine judgment when he says, "For his eye," which is the foresight of divine providence, "is on the ways of men," on their works. He then expresses the idea that God knows each and every one of the particular details of human actions saying, "and all their steps," all the processes of human works, "he considers," not just in general but individually.

Someone could believe that since God is light and the wicked are in darkness that they are hidden from God, but he excludes this saying, "There is no darkness," of ignorance, "nor shadow of death," which refers to the obscurity of fault leading to death, "where those who do evil can hide" as if to say: Just as they did not want to know God so God does not want to know them. Yet it is said as a reproof that they do not know. Since he had said that princes die suddenly and are dispossessed for their sins (v.20), (which seems to be an irremediable punishment), he then shows the reason for this from the fact that when God judges a man for his sins and finally condemns him, the ability is not given to a man that he can further contend the judgment with God. He expresses this saying, "No more," after God has judged and condemned him "there is the ability in man that he should come to God in judgment," as though God should retract his judgment on his account. He seems to say this especially against Job who, after he had been condemned to punishment, had said above, "I will come to his throne and I will place my case before him." (23:3)