

Dougherty, John J.
- The wisdom of Job,
ADN 6727

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THE CATHOLIC HOUR

SERIES: "THE WISDOM OF THE
SCRIPTURES"

"The Wisdom of Job"

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DECEMBER 7, 1958

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC MEN

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The Wisdom of Job

In these talks I should like to share with you some reflections on wisdom. First of all I must tell you what I mean by wisdom. I mean an understanding of the ultimate purposes of human existence, a realization of the real meaning of life. Wisdom is proverbially associated with religion and philosophy, with holy men, quiet men, thinking men. There is a proper climate for wisdom. It is silence and solitude.

The reason why I have chosen to talk to you about wisdom is simply because people seldom talk about it these days. Have you ever been on a plane filled with salesmen? They do not talk about wisdom; they talk about business. I recall a conversation I had a few years ago with a young man who had just come here from Europe. He had been in New York a few days when I met him and asked what his first impressions were. I was amused when he said to me, "On the subways, everybody talks about money."

I concede that the subways are not

the best place to talk about wisdom. Neither is a football stadium, nor a cocktail party, nor the floor of the stock exchange, nor the supermarket, nor the rush of weekend traffic. I mean to say that we spend a lot of our lives in places that are action-packed, fast moving, frenetic. Hardly the climate of wisdom! You must flee the busy market-place, get out of reach of the voice of huckster selling his wares on your TV screen, and go apart to a quiet church or a quiet room and listen in your heart and think in your mind.

That will help, but I do not believe it is the whole answer. I do not think that wisdom is something you can get all on your own. In this matter I fear for the man who considers himself all sufficient unto himself. We need the help of those of proven wisdom. You may know someone who is your wise man, one whose counsel you seek and whose judgment you trust, one who shares his wisdom with you. And how does he come by his wisdom. Others have shared their wisdom with him, both the living and the dead. He may have learned something of his wisdom from books, perhaps from the book of Job.

You may be accustomed to think of

Job as a patient man. "The patience of Job" is a household proverb. Or you may think of Job as a suffering man. That he was. He was also a wise man, or better, the author of the book of Job was a wise man. We may grow in wisdom by reflecting together on this inspired book.

You recall the story: Job, an oriental chieftan was very rich, but upright and pious. Suddenly there came to him a reversal of fortune. He lost his estates and his family. His body was struck with a loathesome disease. Three friends came to console him. They told him his suffering was because of his sins. In his bodily pain and mental anguish Job protested that he was innocent of sin, and could not understand why he was so sorely afflicted. The heart of the book is a series of exchanges between Job and his friends in which they debate the problem of suffering and sin.

One of life's inescapable realities is suffering. The book of Job is the story of one man's suffering told in epic proportions, it is a deep and moving drama. It is held as one of literature's greatest masterpieces as well as God's inspired word. Suffering touches the

life of every man in some measure, and therefore the message of the book is a universal one. You will find in the words of Job an echo of your own heart. He will say things you have felt, but were powerless to express even to yourself. The book is not the last word on wisdom in the Scriptures, but it can help us to be less foolish and more wise.

My first reflection on reading Job is that here pain finds a voice. It speaks in stark and startling terms. We are forced to say this is a familiar voice, true speech, valid argument, for a voice responds within our hearts to the agonizing eloquence of Job, and we feel that he speaks our language:

My soul ebbs away from me;

 Within me there is a seething that
 will not be stilled

My gnawing pains take no rest by
 night;

 days of affliction have come upon
 me.

I go about in gloom, without the sun;

 I rise up in public to voice my grief.

I have become the brother of jackals,
 Companion to the ostrich.

My blackened skin falls away from me;
 the heat scorches my very frame.

My harp is turned to mourning,

and my reed pipe to sounds of weeping. (30:16-31)

One could interpret the suffering of Job in terms of feeling and folly. Such an interpretation was the emotional outburst of Job's wife. "Curse God, and die." (2:9) One might try to interpret it in terms of wisdom. Such was the effort of Job's friend. Their wisdom was that taught by the wise men of their times, a teaching that looked back upon a long and venerable tradition. According to that wisdom suffering was a consequence of sin. Job's friends contended that if he suffered, it was because of his sins. The problem they confronted in the case of Job was that in the eyes of men he was a just man. His friends conceded that he might be just in the eyes of men but not in the eyes of God. They believed that a man could be guilty of hidden sin, sins unknown even to himself.

Job rebelled against his tidy wisdom. He was convinced of his own innocence in the sight of men and of God. He found it agonizing mental pain to think that a just God would allow the innocent to suffer. In Job's eyes the traditional wisdom broke down under the impact of human experience. There must be another answer.

How sickly are your self-righteous
words;

how unconvincing is your argument!

(6:25)

You are glossing over falsehoods

And offering vain remedies, every-
one of you!

Oh, that you would be altogether
silent!

This for you would be wisdom.

Is it for God that you speak falsehood?

Is it for him that you utter deceit?

Your reminders are ashy maxims,

Your fabrications are mounds of
clay. (13:4-12)

Sharply and boldly Job declares the
wisdom of his Comforters unconvincing.

True to himself he protests his innocence:

Let God weigh me in the scales of
justice;

Thus will he know my innocence!

(31:6)

He is tormented by the tension within
him between an honest mind and a be-
lieving heart, tormented by the apparent
contradiction of God's justice and the
suffering of the innocent.

We must not forget to view Job's
anguished protest in the perspective of
Old Testament religion. When the book

was written the Jewish people had no knowledge of the true nature of life beyond the grave. They believed in the survival of the soul in a nether world called Sheol. It dwelt not in men's desires to go there. They believed it to be a place of darkness and oblivion. Without distinction the just and the unjust were assembled to endure a shadowy sort of existence. The dead were cut off from all knowledge of earthly things, and there was no praise of the Lord in Sheol. All shared a common destiny; the prince was like the pauper, the master like the slave.

With such a notion of the afterlife we may well understand why men preferred this life to Sheol, and since they were convinced of the justice of God, it was a natural conclusion to believe that he rewarded the just and punished the wicked in this life. Such wisdom was sorely strained by the evidence of the facts of life, which so often seemed to demonstrate just the opposite. Only in light of these consideration of Sheol and earthly retribution can we understand the book of Job and its statement of the problem of pain. The weight of Job's suffering had brought him to such a state that he preferred Sheol to life:

Why then did you bring me forth from
the womb?

I should have died and no eye have
seen me.

I should be as though I had never
lived;

I should have been taken from the
womb to the grave.

Are not the days of my life few?

Let me alone, that I may recover a
little

Before I go whence I shall not return,
to the land of darkness and gloom,

The black, disordered land
where darkness is the only light.

(10:18-22)

The maddening paradox of pain to Job
may now be better understood. The
traditional wisdom declared that God
rewards the just and punishes the wicked
on this earth. Job saw his own experience
as a contradiction of this wisdom, for he
knew his innocence and his suffering
was so grave.

I have heard this sort of thing many
times

Wearisome comforters are you all!

Is there no end to windy words?

Or what sickness have you that you
speak on?

I also could talk as you do

were you in my place
I could declaim over you,
or wag my head at you.
I could strenghten you with talk,
or shake my head with silent lips.
If I speak, this pain I have will not
be checked;
if I leave off, it will not depart from
me. (16:1-6)

What wisdom is there then in the book of Job, if the old wisdom cannot stand up against the vehemence of his argument? Job's wisdom is in the honesty and strength of his conviction that wisdom must be more than a speculative escape from the realities of human experience. It cannot presume to ignore reality. It must tangle with it and test its strength. Job's wisdom was his capacity to reason with life and to believe in God. If the old wisdom did not answer the question why the innocent suffer, it did not follow that the traditional faith in a God of justice must collapse. The wisdom of Job was in the fact that his faith was strong enough to live with the questions. He could say of himself:

I wore my honesty like a garment;
justice was my robe and my turban.
I was eyes to the blind,

and feet to the lame was I:
I was a father to the needy;
the rights of the stranger I studied,
And I broke the jaws of the wicked
man;
from his teeth I forced the prey
(29:14-17)

He argued that his suffering was not retribution for sin. It was rather the mysterious will of God:

But he has decided, and who can say
him nay?

What he desires that he does (23:13)
He knew that if he could see God he
would understand but he also knew how
difficult it was to see God:

But if I go to the east, he is not there;
or to the west I cannot perceive him;
Where the north enfolds him, I behold
him not;

by the south he is veiled, I see him
not (23:8f)

For Job wisdom was not the pat
answer and the facile phrase. It was
deep and mysterious. It is with God.

Whence, then, comes wisdom,

And where is the place of under-
standing?

God knows the way to it:

it is he who is familiar with its
place.

And to man he said;

Behold, the fear of the Lord is
wisdom;

and avoiding evil understanding.

The wisdom of Job is in the fact that he will not deny what is real by experience nor what is real by faith. By experience he knows suffering. By faith he believes in a just God. With his meager knowledge of the afterlife he could not see how these two realities could be reconciled, but not withstanding he believed.

The faith of Job was founded on God and his creation. "The Lord addressed him out of the storm" (38:1) He overwhelmed him with questions saying "I will question you, and you tell me the answers" (38:3)

Where were you when I founded the
earth?

Who determined its size, do you know?
Have you ever in your lifetime com-
manded the morning and shown the
dawn its place?

Have the gates of death been shown to
you or have you seen the gates of
darkness?

Will we have arguing with the Almighty
by the critic?

Have you an arm like that of God

or can you thunder with a voice
like his?

Would you condemn me that you may
be justified? (38-41 passim)

The Lord's speech was a flood of
questions which might be summed up on
this one: Who is man to probe the secrets
of divine power or to question the motives
of the divine wisdom? The realization
of God's wisdom and power left Job
without argument and without protest:

Behold, I am of little account; what
can I answer you?

I put my hand over my mouth (40:4)
I have dealt with great things that I do
not understand;

Things too wonderful for me which I
cannot know. (42:3)

We learn wisdom from Job by behold-
ing the magnificence of his faith. He
saw so much of God's wisdom and power
in the world that all the pain and all his
protest could not make him abandon
faith. He might protest and argue, but
argument and protest withered in the
fuller manifestation of God. The wisdom
of Job is not the wisdom of Paul. Job
did not have the revelation Paul had
about the afterlife whereby he could say,
"The sufferings of the present time are
not worthy to be compared with the glory

to come" (Romans 8:18) The wisdom of Job is that a man with towering faith can live with burning questions unanswered, realizing that should one wish to contend with him (God), he could not answer him once in a thousand times. (9:3)

We who live anxiously on a globe over which hangs an atomic sword suspended by a slender thread can learn from Job that without faith we are lost, that fear of the sword can be the beginning of the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. The end of wisdom is love of the Lord.

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