

Devotion on the Book of Job (Chapter 23) – 25 January 2013, Anno Domini (Conversion of St Paul)



The Conversion of St. Paul
The Collect

O GOD, who, through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Saint Paul, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world; Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may show forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same, by following the holy doctrine which he taught; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There are moments in our lives when the heavens above seem as hardened brass so that our prayers bounce back upon our own heads. During those moments, we presume that God has turned a deaf ear to our pleadings, but God is never deaf to the prayers of His saints. In a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, he expresses the forlorn despair of the tested soul:

*My prayers must meet a brazen heaven
And fail and scatter all away.
Unclean and seeming unforgiven
My prayers I scarcely call to pray.
I cannot buoy my heart above;
Above I cannot entrance win.
I reckon precedents of love,
But feel the long success of sin.*

*My heaven is brass and iron my earth:
Yea, iron is mingled with my clay,
So harden'd is it in this dearth
Which praying fails to do away.
Nor tears, nor tears this clay uncouth
Could mould, if any tears there were.
A warfare of my lips in truth,
Battling with God, is now my prayer.*

(The poet experiences some of the misery of Job, but lacks his faith)

Job 23

King James Version (KJV)

23 Then Job answered and said,

2 Even to day is my complaint bitter: my stroke is heavier than my groaning.

3 Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!

4 I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.

5 I would know the words which he would answer me, and understand what he would say unto me.

6 Will he plead against me with his great power? No; but he would put strength in me.

7 There the righteous might dispute with him; so should I be delivered for ever from my judge.

8 Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him:

9 On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him:

10 But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

11 My foot hath held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined.

12 Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.

13 But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth.

14 For he performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him.

15 Therefore am I troubled at his presence: when I consider, I am afraid of him.

16 For God maketh my heart soft, and the Almighty troubleth me:

17 Because I was not cut off before the darkness, neither hath he covered the darkness from my face.

This chapter in Job can be divided into three significant parts:

1. In verses 1-9, we read of Job's searching for God to plead his cause.
2. In verses 10-12, Job recognizes that God is refining him as gold, and he will emerge from his troubles pure.

3. In verses 13-17, Job acknowledges that it will be God's will that is done and not his own.

As I was discussing the previous chapter devotion and our reference to God's rainbow with a dear friend, we talked of how the rainbow covers the canopy of heaven but, yet, touches the earth at some point. My mother, being Irish, would tell me of a 'Pot of God' at the end of the rainbow – but I can assure you that there is far more than a 'Pot of Gold' where the heavens came down to touch the earth. Jesus came down two thousand years ago and opened the floodgates of mercy and love for us. Being the Light of the World, he brought every color of the rainbow with Him and covenanted with us as of old. It is remarkable in my view that Job began with great faith but, hammered mercilessly by his friends, he began to feel deserted by God; however, the more they lambast him, he begins to grow more staunchly fixed in that reviving faith and courage of a righteous man. In our modern world, the true-believing Church is harried from pillar to post, yet a greater and more enduring faith will always arise. The world today is enjoying a drunken orgy, but once the orgy is over, they shall plead with the church for a sanctuary from the justice of their licentious sins.

Even in the opening lines of the chapter (v 1-9); Job again expresses grief at not being able to connect, as in olden days, with the comforting fellowship of God. Knowing God to be just and also full of mercy, Job asserts that, if he could only converse with God, God would be persuaded by his argument and grant a reprieve from his present sufferings. **2. Even to day is my complaint bitter: my stroke is heavier than my groaning.** **3 Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!** **4 I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments.** **5 I would know the words which he would answer me, and understand what he would say unto me.** Much as the fair, Shulamite maiden of Solomon's Song longs for her Lily of the Valleys and her Rose of Sharon to comfort and reassure her, so does Job long for that fellowship of prior days he has enjoyed with the LORD. So, too, does the true Church in our day long for the same Rose of Sharon, and the encouraging Lily of the Valleys to light our way in a sin-darkened world.

Job may not know the Why of God's workings, but he knows well the Nature and Character of God. **6 Will he plead against me with his great power? No; but he would put strength in me.** **7 There the righteous might dispute with him; so should I be delivered for ever from my judge.** When we have entrusted our fortunes in a strong and reputable bank, we may not know in what way they will safeguard our funds, but we do know that the bank will take whatever measures are necessary to keep our interests safe and secure. Job knows well that God will not come against him in violence but rather as a loving Father. Is it possible for the righteous to commune with God with questions and arguments? Yes, Abraham dealt with God prior to the destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain. The process did not change the will of God – for He was bent on the destruction of those wicked cities – but it did change Abraham's mind in knowing that God would not destroy Sodom for the sake of ten innocents. But God knew that there were not even ten innocents. Jacob likewise wrestled with God. God was not changed, but Jacob was permanently changed. Job feels that his predicament is based on some presumed evil that God sees in him but the circumstances are just the reverse – God has allowed Job to be tempted because He sees Job as RIGHTEOUS! He knows Job will withstand the storm and become an everlasting encouragement and witness to us who, likewise, suffer unjustly for our faith.

There is a growing faith in Job's present doubt. He readily admits that, though he cannot find God, God is present and hiding His visage from him.⁸ *Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: 9 On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him.* Since God is present everywhere and at all times (omnipresent), Job knows that God is present even if Job cannot see Him.

It is a continual worry to the saints that they are unworthy of the grace of God and deserve their tortures of the world; but, though they certainly do not deserve the grace of God, it would no longer be grace if it were deserved. And, yes, we do deserve the tortures of earth and Hell, but God has called by grace through faith, into the heart of His Beloved Son, Jesus. Please observe how Job's compass bounces, at times, from true north, but at last always returns to its proper reading. He doubts, and his doubts actually FEED his faith. The first nine verses depict a weakness in faith, but see how the faith is confirmed in the next three verses: *10 But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold. 11 My foot hath held his steps, his way have I kept, and not declined. 12 Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.* Job knows, despite his sometime doubts, that God is good, and that whatever God brings into his life will be a refinement of his character and virtue. Can we all recognize this? See how in verse 12 that Job treasures the Bread of Heaven more than the bread made from the fruit of the earth?

Finally, Job acknowledges that, in spite of his own reasoning and logic, that of God Almighty is always sure and true. The will of God is always based on best wisdom and knowledge of the facts above those of any mortal. God, knowing the best in the long outcome, will not change His will for He does not vacillate between two opinions as does man. *13 But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth.* Truly, God is of One Mind. When we have taken God's will into our lives to the out-casting of our own frail wills, we will always ask those things that are convenient to God to grant. Divisions in Church and society itself will disappear for those individuals and nations whose direction is dictated by that Bright and Morning Star.*14 For he performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him.* Have we not read this in remarkable places of the Holy Scriptures? *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.* (Heb 13:8)

Should we fear God as Christians? Yes, but not with the mortal fear a convicted murderer has for the guillotine; the fear of a Christian for the Father should be the fear a good son has for his Father whom he never wishes to disgrace or make ashamed. *15 Therefore am I troubled at his presence: when I consider, I am afraid of him. 16 For God maketh my heart soft, and the Almighty troubleth me:* Job says that God has melted his heart to be without courage. Did not Christ suffer more greatly all of our afflictions? Read His words from the cross: *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.* (Psalms 22:14)

Job claims that he has been spared the comfort of death before the pitch darkness that has arisen and that, instead of covering Himself with a cloud of darkness, God has covered Job's face with that darkness. *17 Because I was not cut off before the darkness, neither hath he covered the darkness from my face.* The eyes of God are never blinded to our present circumstances, only our understanding is clouded from knowing the perfect will of God; therefore, we often linger in pointless doubt.