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Nihil nisi Jesum



Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

www.boston-catholic-journal.com
editor@boston-catholic-journal.com

LENT: Bitterness and Blessedness



In all these things Job did not sin

The Holy Season of Lent — a time, perhaps the last time — for repentance and to **do** penance; a time of bitterness and a time of blessedness, and so often their mingling is inseparable from the sanctity that lies deeply within. Who has prepared the chalice, and what lies within? God Himself!

Often it is *so* difficult to grasp! The two, the bitterness and the blessedness, seem of themselves not only *unable* to coexist — but so often each comes to us at the *cost* of the other. How are we to reconcile the brooding cultivation of evil experienced, suffered (and, yes, even inflicted!) and endured, with a yield of the fruit of blessedness? These are deep and stirring waters; depths unmeasured and immeasurable by man. Even pellucid and untainted, the depth blinds the mind in a sacred darkness the mind cannot illuminate nor the intellect penetrate. These are primeval waters stirred by the finger of God. Ultimately they are the waters of Baptism and regeneration! Waters of life! Even living waters!

Job, the holy servant of God, knew both: the bitterness and the blessedness, and as we enter into this sacred Season we would do well to learn of him and from him. The “suffering of Job” is proverbial. It will be interesting for us to learn not just what he suffered — but from whom. It is well that before we enter the cruciform transept of Lent, we start *before* we open those blessed doors. And we will start with Job to understand Who has prepared the chalice and learn what lies within.

“CURSE GOD AND DIE”

Calamity and rejection. This is the response to the scandal of Job’s suffering ... *from his own wife!* — and it will be the response of the world to you: “**Curse God and die**, you fool!”

This Lent we will understand why this response to suffering and calamity is disastrous. In fact, through understanding Lent we will see why Lent is the antidote to this poison — and perhaps learn who tried to place that first drop into the chalice. Let us consider Job:

Job lost *everything*

Everything: children, house, health, good name, property ... you name it, and Job lost it. Covered with boils from “**the sole of his foot to the crown of his head**”, he sat upon the ashes he sprinkled over his head and scraped himself of festering boils

with a potsherd. Three friends came, barely recognizing Job, and sat a week with him in silence. They then proceeded to “console” Job ... by convicting him of his sins ... sins he never committed.

Finally, Job himself uttered what we all have uttered at one time or another in our lives: “**Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?**” In other words, would that his nakedness had *never* been clothed in honor and glory — for then he would not know the pain of *losing* what he never had.

But God had “... **made a fence for him, and his house, and all his substance round about, blessed the works of his hands, and his possession hath increased on the earth.**” (Job 1.10)

God prospered Job.

The evil one, knowing this, tore down the hedge, devastated Job's house, and ***tempted Job to despair*** ... to give up on God.

And yet ... incredibly, “***in all these things Job sinned not.***” Job was blameless before God.

We know Job.

We have ***been*** Job ... in one form or another at some point, perhaps at many points, in our lives.

We have been devastated, deprived of what we esteemed good, lost our health, our jobs, our dignity, security ... and, for great sorrow, even our families.

How do we console ourselves? Most often, as Job's friends had consoled him, we tell ourselves that our misfortune is, in some incomprehensible sense, ***just*** ... that we are suffering the rigors of an exacting and ineluctable justice that we had somehow eluded for sins or crimes we no longer remember ... from which we had inexplicably managed to escape, and which have finally caught up with us and demanded tribute.

However, the fact of the matter is that — at least in the case of Job — Job's misfortunes were ***not just***. There was no proportion between what he suffered and what he had done — indeed, Job had done nothing but good!

Job's misfortunes were not God's “payback”. And neither are ours.

Even *were* justice demanded of us for our sins – and unlike Job, our own sins are many – we can never make adequate restitution, never pay reparation, for we are too poor. We had squandered that patrimony of grace which had been given our First Parents in justice, and we forfeited it just as they did — *even after* Baptism washed us of that Original Sin, that primal effrontery through which our patrimony became our poverty! Only what is *without sin* can cancel sin. And that justice has already been rendered — through Jesus Christ on the Cross.

Yes, God is just. But it was not Job — and it is not us — it is *God Himself* who paid the price of justice in the shattered humanity of Christ.

Rendering Justice to God

God did not — *and He does not* — exact the restitution of justice from *us*. We do not possess the tribute, the wherewithal — and we are fools, or deceived, if we believe that *we* can render justice to God. *Only God can render justice to God*. Why? Because the *plenitude* of justice that *is* God and that is *due* God is infinite because God Himself is infinite. His justice — like His love, goodness, and mercy — is the *perpetual act* of His being: it is, as it were, the *very fabric* of His *Being*: a “*Being-good*”, a “*Being-loving*”, a “*Being-merciful*” ... and a “*Being-just*”.

Love, mercy, goodness, justice are not merely “*parts*” of God’s Being — rather, His being *is* a “*Being-good*”, a “*Being-loving*”, a “*Being-merciful*” ... and a “*Being-just*”. These *infinite and eternal acts* (the *acts of being*: a-being-loving, a-being-good, a-being-just) do not simply *coincide* with His Being as something extraneous to it — they *constitute* His *Being*! To sin against justice, then, is to sin against the infinite justice of *God Who alone is a Being-just* ... and note merely a “just” being. How, then, can *finite* man make *infinite* restitution? We cannot. Only Christ, being God, could — on the Cross. That is why Jesus is called, “**the Just One.**”*

So what of Job? What of us?

We came into this world with nothing. We will leave it with nothing. We think that we have worked for, *earned*, all the good things we enjoy, and reckon the day they may be taken from us *injustice*. Injustice was never done us, for we never merited, *deserved*, any of these things. What, then, of all our hard work and sweat?

Ask yourself from the depths of the truthfulness of your being: have you worked harder, more diligently, more desperately, more deservingly, than the poverty stricken farmer in sub-Sahara Africa? Why is he not adorned as you? Why is his plate empty? Because you are “more just” and these things are your “more justly” yours (your “due” in justice?) — but somehow not his?

If you possess power, wealth, esteem, glory, in this world, do not congratulate yourself on your diligence, your “uncanny” insight, your “good luck” and success. Given the blandishment of the evil one — the “father of lies” — which we find in the temptation of Christ, *it is, I suggest, far more appropriate to tremble.*

Behold Job. And also behold Christ — Christ Who was *also* tempted by that same evil one who, in his empty promise, is frightfully revealing:

“And the devil led Him into a high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time; and he said to Him: To thee will I give all this power, and the glory of them; for to me they are delivered, and to whom I will, I give them.” (Saint Luke 4.5-6)

Ask yourself soberly: *whence* your prosperity, your power, your wealth? *From whom*, and to what end? And at the cost of whose dignity and through the poverty of how many did you acquire it? Prosperity, many Protestants hold, is a sign of *God's* favor, a token of His predilection: if you are “just” and “Godly”, God will prosper you.

Misfortune and *suffering*, then, are — much in line with the reasoning of Job’s “consolers” — *afflictions from God*. They are the *penalty* — meted out by God — for “injustice” and “ungodliness”. Material prosperity, on the other hand, together with wealth and power — these are *God's* blessings for the “just”. It is, in a word, their “reward” ... their “due” in all *justice*.

But it was not Saint Paul’s ... nor the “reward” due in “justice” to the other Apostles:

“Even unto this hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no fixed abode; And we labor, working with our own hands: we are reviled, and we bless; we are persecuted, and we suffer it. We are blasphemed, and we entreat; we are made as the refuse of this world, the offscouring of all even until now” (1 Cor. 4.10-13)

The Diabolically Brilliant ... Illusion

This was the insidious trap set for Job by the devil through his “consolers” ... and by our own self-recrimination in the face of misfortune. We are confronted with misfortune. Who is to blame? With incredible subtlety, the devils suggests that *Either we are guilty — or God is!* If we are *not* guilty for this misfortune, then *God* is. If *God* is not, then *we* are. ***But neither is the case!***

In other words, Job brought it *unknowingly* upon himself — and God (*not* the devil, mind you ...) was perfectly willing to be complicit in this injustice —by punishing Job for what he did *not* do! What is more, He punished Job by “unjustly” taking away “what was his”. It was a masterpiece of illusion! *Diabolically* brilliant! Job was tempted by the devil to *despair* in having “unjustly” lost all that was “*not his in justice*” to begin with!

In a supreme irony, Christ was tempted by the same devil to idolatry through an empty promise to give Him what was ***already His to begin with.***

Remember, *who* precisely was it who had said that wealth, material prosperity, and power ***was his to give?*** And *who* was it that took it away from Job – ***that was his to give and his to take?***

Misfortunes are not from God. Nor are they the penalty of your sins, for you would then have nothing (given your countless sins and the justice that would be exacted for each.)

Misfortunes, suffering, want, pain, destitution, illness, are not lofty, if cruel, tributes to justice! They are evils! Evils *out of which God ever brings good ...* as He did with Job who, ***“in all these things ... sinned not.”***

Misfortune is not of your own making — still less is it from God. Saint Paul understood this. You must also:

“For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and power, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect.”
(Ephesians 6.12)

Let us see misfortune for what it is — and not for what the “father of lies” would entice us to believe. *Evil is from the “evil one”*, endlessly contending with the ever redemptive love of God lifting us up from the squalor of misery through the arduous path to holiness, calling us from that relentless malice that would pull us down to despair.

Acts 7.52



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Editor
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PO Box 80171 Stoneham, MA 02180 US

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