

THE BOOK OF WISDOM – SECTION IV

VIRTUE AND SUFFERING

I. Chapters 3 and 4 then turn to the rewards of virtue with reference to glory, reputation, and the value of life.

A. In ancient Israel, the blessings promised to the just were centered on prosperity, children, and a long life. See, e.g., Duet. 5:32-33; 7:12-15

B. And so, in this section, the book responds to the objections that the just: (1) often suffer; (2) sometimes are childless; and (3) often die early.

1. Chapter 3, verses 1 to 12 discuss suffering in the context of proving virtue and as a preparation for everlasting glory.

2. Chapter 3, verse 13 to chapter 4, verse 6 discuss childlessness as a lesser burden than a lack of virtue, and virtue as what really leads to everlasting glory.

- Unlike the other two subsections, these verses do not present the suffering as a blessing in disguise, but only as a lesser burden that can be overcome by virtue.

3. Chapter 4, verses 7 to 20 discuss the early death of the virtuous as an indication that the virtuous person has already reached the perfection God wishes for him.

C. The question of why the just suffer and do not seem to receive their rightful rewards had already been discussed in certain contexts.

1. The Book of Job posits the question, but does not so much answer it as indicate that the mystery of God is too great for human understanding.

2. Some of the Psalms, especially the psalms of lament and psalms of wisdom, posited the question of why the innocent suffer. See, e.g., Ps. 22, 37, 49, 73. These psalms typically express confidence that the Lord will in the end save

the just, while the wicked, despite their current prosperity, are on the path of destruction.

3. Likewise, the prophets would present suffering in the context of serving God. See Is. 52:12-53:12; Jer. 18:19-23, 19:7-18; Dan. 3:18. Except for Isaiah, the prophets do not so much explain the suffering in the context of a reward for it as they simply place supreme confidence that God will see them through and that His justice will prevail.

D. Here, there is a clearer statement that sufferings and sacrifices can be a preparation for a greater blessing, suffering for glory, childlessness for a never-dying reputation, and a short life for pure life with God.

II. The beginning of chapter 3 presents the just who have suffered and died as blessed by God.

A. When an individual is suffering but still living, one may believe that he will be rewarded later in life. But here the book is dealing with the situation in which the just man is dead and therefore cannot be rewarded in this life.

B. The book that the souls of the just are in the hands of God.

1. The book does not mention the bodies of the just, reflecting the fact that the resurrection of the just has not yet occurred.

2. The image of the Lord keeping His faithful in His hand is used several times in the Old Testament, mostly in the context of God guiding His people, the king or the prophet through the dangers of the world to a glorious inheritance, now judging the nations. See Duet. 33:3; Ps. 89:14; Is. 51:16, 62:3. Jesus later uses this image in the Good Shepherd discourse. See John 10:28.

3. The image is here one of finality, as with the image of the glorified People of God as the Bride of the Lord in Isaiah 62:3, now not only guided through the sufferings of this earth, but rather beyond them.

C. Perhaps reflecting the Suffering Servant imagery of Isaiah, the next passage, in verses 2 and 3, dramatically contrasts the apparent defeat of goodness in the world, with a peaceful realm for the just outside of it. See Is. 52:13, 57:2. The passage is

picking up on the prophecies of a new and glorious realm, see, e.g., Isaiah 65:17-25, 66:10-21, Ez. 47-48; Amos 4:17-18; Micah 4:1-5:4, Zech. 9:9-17, but making it clear that this realm is not only for future generations

- The salvation promised is also in the plural; the just are saved together.

D. The passage then switches to blessings that are in the future, i.e. that the just will be immortal, purified as an offering to God, shine in glory, judge nations, understand truth, and abide with God. The current blessings are generally phrased in terms of being at peace, and experiencing God's care. At the time of the writing of this book, the just were not yet in heaven, and thus were not yet experiencing the higher level of joy reflected in the other promises. The account of the death of Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew reflects the dead being released into heaven. See Matt. 27:51-53; see also John 5:25. The blessings promised here are roughly paralleled by the promises made in the messages to the seven churches at the beginning of the Book of Revelation. See Rev. 2:1-3:22.

1. The first promise is immortality. This word in Greek (athanasia) is used in the Old Testament (including the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament) for the first time here. The idea is a realm beyond death (thanos.) The unjust may still exist in some sense of the word, but it will be a living death. Jesus elaborates on this theme saying that those who hear Him and receive Him will not see death, although they may die. See, e.g., Dan. 12:1-3; John 5:25-29, 6:40, 51, 54, 63, 68.

2. There is also an implied purification, for the passage says that God will take the just as a sacrificial offering to Himself.

- Sacrificial offerings had to be pure, and thus if God is taking the just one as a sacrificial offering it implies that he is purified. The letters to the Romans and Hebrews and the first letter of St. Peter will pick up on this theme of making a sacrifice of our own lives. Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15, 1 Pet. 2:5.

3. Likewise, the passage says that they will be made pure and valuable as gold. See Job 23:10; Dan. 2:32, 37-38. Gold carries the image of permanence when all else fades away. See 1 Cor. 3:12; Rev. 3:18, 21:18-21.

4. The next blessing is that they will shine forth in the midst of the stubble and dross of this world.

- The idea is that this world is all subject to destruction and will end in ashes, and it is the just who will shine in that context. See Dan. 12:1-3; Joel 3:3-5; Obad. 18. The eschatological discourses of Jesus speak of the world ending

in destruction, but likewise of the faithful shining on afterward, a prophecy that the book of Revelation elaborates on. See Matt. 24:29-31; Mk. 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28; see also Matt. 14:43.

- The promise is that they will shine in glory at the time of visitation. This phrase is noteworthy because it generally refers to a time of punishment. See Is. 10:3, Jer. 8:12; Micah 7:4; Hos. 9:7; see also Luke 19:44. The idea is that, when the trial comes, those who are faithful will instead shine on in the light of God that punishes those who would keep their deeds dark and away from God. See 1 Peter 2:12.

5. The next blessing is that the just will rule over peoples and judge nations. There is a promise that those who have suffered will be rewarded with great authority. In fact there is perhaps an implication that suffering purifies one for authority.

- There were promises that the future king would rule over nations, see, e.g., Ps. 2, 110, Is. 8:23-9:6, 11:1-9. But here there is also a promise that all the just will share in that authority. See also Ps. 149:7, Dan. 7:27. Jesus would also promise that those who are faithful to Him will receive great authority and cities to rule over. See Matt. 19:28, 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27; see also 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 5:10

6. The next promise is that those who trust in God will understand truth.

- There is recognition that we do not now understand all of God's ways, but we are called to trust in Him, and will later come to understand Him. This notion would be summarized by St. Anselm, "I believe, that I may understand."

- The prophets had warned against questioning the ways of God. See, e.g., Is. 45:9-13; Jer. 18:1-13. But here there is the promise that those who trust in God will come to understand His truth. Jesus would later describe His apostles as friends, rather than slaves because they understand Him and His ways. See John 15:14-17; 1 Cor. 13:12-13..

7. The final and culminating promise is that the faithful will abide with God in love. The promise of this ability actually to live with God would have astounded an ancient Jew.

- Under the Old Covenant, God was with His people in the Ark of the Covenant, which only the priests could only come near, and only the high priest could approach, at that once a year. The very presence of God on Mount Sinai

had been so terrifying that the Chosen People stayed their distance. See Ex. 19:10-25; Duet. 5:23-31. Likewise, when people were in the presence of God or even an angel, they were terrified of their presence, believing it too much for a mortal. See, e.g., Judges 6:22, 13:21-23; Tob. 12:16; Is. 6:5.

- At the time of the Book of Wisdom, even the Ark was no longer in the Temple. Before the Babylonian exile in 586, the prophet Jeremiah had hidden away even that ark, never again to be recovered. Thus, while the ancient Jews trusted that God guided the people from the Temple, the presence of God was no longer there as much as in the days of the Ark.

- The passage is promising that the faithful will actually be with God forever, the highest honor one can imagine. See also John 15:1-10; 1 Thess. 4:17; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 3:20.

E. These promises also give a meaning to suffering, indicating that the suffering of the just is a necessary preparation for them.

1. Verse 5 does make it clear that the suffering is, among other things a disciplining to make one better. The Old Testament repeatedly states that God disciplines His people to make them more worthy. See, e.g., Duet. 8:2-3; Prov. 3:11-12; Sir. 2:1-6, 4:17-19.

2. Verse 5 also presents sufferings as a test that, if one passes, leads to great glory. It applies the lessons of the Book of Job and the Suffering Servant prophecies of Isaiah to each one of the just. See also Rom. 8:16-18; 2 Cor. 4:17. Jesus thus states that the faithful must take up our cross with Him in order to share His glory. See Mark 8:34-38.

3. The images of gold and the sacrificial offerings in verse 6 also imply a value to suffering insofar as they make one worthy to be with God.

- Gold would be melted to get the impurities out. Likewise, the soul of the just (or mostly just) suffers a trial of fire to remove the impurities so that he may shine forever in the splendor of God. Prov. 17:3; Is. 1:25; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:3.

- There is also a notion that the trial by fire tests whether the soul is really made of gold or of a perishable imitation. See Job 23:10; Ps. 17:3; 1 Cor. 3:12.

- The sacrificial offering would be immolated and offered to God. The implication here is that the suffering of this life is the offering to God of one's life, and that this offering is taken into heaven. Isaiah prophesied that the Suffering Servant would make of his life a sacrificial offering for sin. See Is. 53:10. And Jesus fulfilled this prophecy and the ancient sacrifices of the Jews through His own perfect sacrifice. See Heb. 9:11-10:18. However, here there is also an implication that the suffering of all of the just can be seen as a sacrificial offering to God. See Col. 1:24-25.

F. Referring back to the beginning of the passage, this description of the promises to the faithful then states again that God's mercy and grace are upon the faithful.

- Mercy (*miser cordia*) has more the implication of overcoming sin, while grace (*gracia*) has more the implication of God's favor and, in fact, friendship with him. Compare Luke 1:28 with Luke 1:50, 72.

III. The passage then switches over to describing the wicked and their punishment in contrast to the rewards for the faithful who struggle through this world.

A. It describes the wicked as using a certain reasoning, but a false one, a false prudence that leads to death. See James 3:15.

- This reasoning was described in chapter 2, verses 1 to 20, in which the wicked accepted death as the final reality. The passage says that, if one so accepts death as the final reality, one will receive it. See Duet. 30:15-16; Sir. 15:17.

B. The wicked are not blameless, but have ignored justice (or the just one) and God Himself.

C. To rebel against God is to accept death. As St. Paul will later point out, one or other will be one's master. See Rom. 6:12-8:13.