

# Advice from Agur, Part 1

Proverbs 30:10-17

Last week, we met Agur, a man credited for writing what we know as Proverbs 30. Among the prevailing ideas as to who he was, I lean toward the notion that he was a Hebrew wise man in an age of Hebrew wisdom. King Solomon was renowned for his wisdom. Surely, the king's pursuits in this area gave rise to a number of others who were determined to understand and explain life.

This chapter first seized my attention during personal devotions. Agur's self-abasing humility, his sense of wonder at the handiwork of God and his devotion to God's revealed word were admirable. But, his desire for and his contentment with the precise balance between poverty and wealth that God thought best for him was what really got me curious. Not too many people pray like that; "Lord, give me just as much and no more as is best for my relationship with You, for that is what is all-important." I got to thinking that Agur seemed like a pretty well-adjusted guy.

I would like to be half as well-adjusted in this world as Agur, so I started probing this chapter further and I was intrigued by everything I found. In the first message, we explored Agur's worldview. It seems to me that life could be pretty full, joyful and uncomplicated if we were to develop as a foundation for our lives an attitude that resembles the attitude of Agur ...

- 1) **Admit Your Limitations in God's World**
- 2) **Affirm Your Loyalty to God's Word**
- 3) **Accept Your Lot from God's Hand**

If we could just posture ourselves in this world with an outlook like that, life might seem more filled with wonder than worry, more filled with clarity than confusion and more filled with serenity than striving. A man will glean much that is useful in this world when he ceases trying to be all-knowing and self-sufficient. That's what I see happening in Proverbs 30. Agur is not in contention with the world around him. He is observing it closely and learning more about walking in harmony with his Creator in the process. How might Agur advise us in these matters?

## I. Be Silent verse 10

### A. The Precise Admonition: "Be Nice to Servants!"

<sup>10</sup>"Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.

Ever work as a servant? Ever own one? The proverb at hand seems a bit dated, but all Scripture is useful. Sometimes, we just have to look a little harder. There are two takes on this verse. The first, which comes out in the translation I read, is the idea of whispering to a master some false accusation against one of his servants. Why would anyone do that? It's not as though a servant's life was a picnic. Take a fellow who is already in a tough circumstance and make his situation worse by casting a cloud of suspicion over him in the eyes of his master. That's not very nice.

The other possible meaning of the proverb resides in the imprecise meaning of the Hebrew word translated "slander." It could also mean to expose him or turn him in. Refuge for the oppressed was very important in Israel. Regarding runaway slaves, the Law was very clear: "If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master" (Deuteronomy 23:15, 16). Agur could mean that if a runaway slave moves into your town, don't expose him. Stay out of it.

Anyone who slandered a slave by bearing false witness or anyone who turned over a runaway slave contrary to the Law would stand in clear conflict with the will of *JEHOVAH* for his covenant nation. Either way, an atoning sacrifice would be required to God in addition to whatever restitution to the victimized servant was due. Agur warned, "You will pay for it."

## **B. The Broader Admonition: "Muzzle Your Big Mouth!"**

When a man ordered 2 meals, his waitress observed, "You must be hungry"

The man said, "One's for my brother," and he pulled out of his pocket a little guy about five inches tall.

The waitress asked, "Is he real?"

"He's real."

"Can he walk?"

He said, "Hey Jake, get me that pack of sugar." The little guy walked across the table and retrieved the sugar.

"Can he eat?"

"Jake, eat one of those chips." Jake wrestled a chip out of the bowl and started munching.

"Can he talk?"

"Sure, he can talk. Jake, tell her about the time we went hunting in Africa and you called that witch doctor an idiot ..."

"Watch your mouth" is advice that is certainly not foreign to New Testament Christians. Whether we pop off because we have a slanderous spirit or because we cannot mind our own business, the New Testament roundly condemns the irresponsible use of the tongue. We have a responsibility to use the gift of speech to the glory of God by making the lives of others easier, not more difficult. The greatest power that one person has in that regard is in the things he or she says.

<sup>29</sup>Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. – Ephesians 4:29

Any speech that injures another or sparks conflict in a faith community was in the Apostle Paul's sites. The Lord despises gossip, backbiting and arguing and, even today, disobeying God brings consequences. No sacrificial lamb is required to appease God, only repentance. But, while repentance may clear our debt in God's eyes, the damage a loose tongue may do among people is a different matter. No reputation is harder to shake than that of "big mouth." No person is harder to trust than a gossip. No brother is harder to embrace than one known for his critical speech.

## **II. Be Self-Aware verses 11-14**

### **A. Agur Lamented His Own Out-of-Control Times**

<sup>11</sup> "There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers;

<sup>12</sup> those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth;

<sup>13</sup> those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful;

<sup>14</sup> those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives

to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind.

Each of these observations is prefaced by the Hebrew word for "generation." They would more literally read, "There is a *generation* who curse their fathers ... a *generation* pure in their own eyes, a *generation* of haughty eyes," *etc.* Agur is saying more than that there are some of these and some of those. He was describing sins that were so prevalent in his day that his whole generation had to be labeled with them. It wasn't fair. Agur was not such a man. Perhaps, others were innocent, but Israel of Agur's generation was not a humble, parent-honoring or God-fearing nation.

The common denominator of Agur's four observations of his generation is that his was an age marked by self-delusion. Children of every generation reach a point of questioning the wisdom of their parents. The laws governing time and space are suspended during the teen years so that children magically have more life experience than their parents. But, usually, after hitting the wall a few times, children return to an appreciation for their parents' warnings and advice.

But, Agur was lamenting an age that was not typical. Adolescent self-delusion was carried right into adulthood. Men deluded themselves about their standing before God. They thought that outer rituals could somehow compensate for hearts that did not care about the things God cared about. They became "haughty." This is not just the pride of a man who forgets his need for God. It is that amazing arrogance by which a man exalts himself above others. Far from caring about the poor, he exploits them. His teeth and jaws, instruments for eating, are likened unto weapons, so merciless is his insatiable covetousness. It was to a similar generation to which Isaiah spoke:

<sup>15</sup>When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood;

<sup>16</sup>wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong,

<sup>17</sup>learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. - Isaiah 1:15-17

## **B. Self-delusion Is Perilous in Every Age**

This same haughty spirit was still present in Jesus' day, only then it was organized into a major religious sect. Pharisaism was born out of the desire of its founders to withdraw from pagan influences, but it rapidly degenerated into a prideful and heartless hypocrisy. Any compassion on the part of some Pharisees for the poor was twisted into a means of drawing public attention to their own virtues and religious deeds. Jesus chastised certain Pharisees for neglecting the care of their aging parents by dedicating funds to God, funds which they could either direct or "uncommit" at their pleasure.

Meticulously, a Pharisee might observe rituals to showcase his devotion, repentance or purity, but none of these things reflected authentic hearts devoted to God. Jesus called them on it:

<sup>27</sup>"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. - Matthew 23:27, 28

Today, the rituals of what we might call neo-Pharisaism are less superstitious, but the folly is identical, so we must cautiously be on guard against its teachings and influences. There are those in our generation who yearn to be admired by others in matters of the Spirit. The amazing contentment of Agur that prays, "give me neither poverty nor riches" is of no interest to them for they seek blessings from God's hand as the proof of their godliness. But, when all that outer show is stripped away, where is the passion for personal integrity? Where is the sympathy for the poor? Be self-aware. God is constantly scrutinizing our hearts. We should examine your own from time to time.

## **III. Be Satisfied verses 15, 16**

### **A. Agur Expounds on the Insatiability of Covetousness**

<sup>15</sup>"The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry.

"There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!':

<sup>16</sup> the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, 'Enough!'

Agur just touched upon the heartless greed of many in his generation. Now, he addresses the danger for anyone who would make “getting more” a supreme goal in life. Greed is insatiable. Solomon touched on this elsewhere: “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income . . .” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Agur is more graphic, likening greed to a disgusting leech. The two “daughters” of the leech is likely a reference to its two-pronged blood-sucking mechanism. “Give! Give!” The appetite of greed is never satisfied.

Agur uses four additional metaphors for the human appetite that always longs for “more.” “The grave” or *Sheol* refers to the abode of the dead. When I traveled to Ecuador several years ago, I was intrigued and at the same time a bit “creeped out” at the sight of buildings that were essentially above ground cemeteries that covered multiple city blocks and arose several stories into the sky. People will always die, so there will always be a market for funeral services.

The barren womb is another image of something that can never be content. This referred to the burning desire among every Israelite woman to mother a child and the social disgrace she sensed when she could not. Even today, we have probably all known some woman who agonizes over the fact that she cannot conceive contrary to the desire of their heart. Land is another picture. Even in an area as agriculturally vibrant as ours, we experience dry spells so severe that even a downpour seems to make little difference. The soil was so parched that in a few hours, it appears as if it never rained at all. And, of course, a fire will rage as long as there is fuel to keep it going.

## **B. No Carnal Craving Is Satisfied for Long**

I spoke of covetousness in terms of material wealth, but I cannot say that riches were the only thing Agur had in mind. Covetousness is a spirit of discontent. Material wealth is only one of many things after which a man can covet. One man might covet gold. But, another might yearn for escape or delirium and exercise no moderation in his appetite for drugs or alcohol. Robert Downey Jr., has battled substance abuse for years. He recently admitted: “Oh, I can’t drink these days. I’m allergic to alcohol and narcotics. If I use them, I break out in handcuffs.”

Still, another might care very little about material possessions because his life is wrapped up in the esteem in which others hold him, so he pours himself into the things that cause others to admire him. These may be religious ventures or service ventures. The venture may be good even while the heart is not. Some covet power and will resort to any means necessary to achieve it.

We are prone to make idols out of anything upon which we cast our gaze for too long. Earlier in the chapter, Agur prayed for balance in regard to poverty and riches because the most important thing to him was to maintain his own sense of gratitude and, as others looked upon his life, God’s good name. See to it that your relationship with God and your reflection of God to others are always your all-consuming priorities as you assess the importance of the things of this world.

## **IV. Be Submissive verse 17**

### **A. Agur Paints an Awful Image**

<sup>17</sup>“The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures.

Hey! There's a bright and cheery text for a Sunday morning! Bear with me while we figure out what it's all about. Consider "the eye that mocks a father." The eye is a very expressive organ, especially for offspring wanting to make a statement. They stare little daggers through you when they're angry. They roll their eyes as a means of mocking your lectures. They simply avoid eye contact just to annoy you. The bigger issue is this casting off of parental respect and obedience.

God spoke clearly. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). Still, in spite of the commandment, a child's heart is rebellious. I'm not picking on kids. By nature, we are all rebellious against our heavenly Father. But, there is wisdom and safety in honoring one's parents, and I'm not just talking about when you're six, seven or eight years old. I'm talking about your teen years, your twenties, your thirties and for as long as the Lord blesses you with parents. Generally speaking, no two people on earth are more committed to your happiness and success in life. And, in Christian settings, no two people are more interested in your fruitfulness in God's kingdom.

Nevertheless, rebellion often prevails. Agur pictures the young person dying in a valley. Those mocking eyeballs are the first target for the scavengers of the air. Nice image, but the bigger picture is that this child has died alone. He's in the wilderness, not properly buried, estranged from a loving, caring family that knows of his plight or his whereabouts. What is pictured here is the poignant and disastrous consequence of thinking yourself to be wiser than Mom and Dad.

## **B. There Are Dire Consequences When We Cast off All Restraints**

Not every disobedient child will literally die alone in a valley. Frankly, there are a million ways to crash and burn, and typically, parents are there for you when you do. Agur's real objective is to encourage young people to avoid the heartache that inevitably follows a rebellious spirit.

There are other restraints in our lives that are good for us. Governments and rulers are seldom perfect, but God ordains them because, generally speaking, some order is always better than no order at all. For that reason, the Scriptures have no reservation about telling us to be law-abiding, to respect and pray for our leaders and, though it kills me to say it, to pay our taxes.

One of the most valuable restraints in our lives is our relationship with others in the body of Christ. In fellowship, brothers and sisters in Christ share the burdens of life with us. Shepherds and overseers for our lives express their love for us not only by teaching and encouraging us, but also by correcting us and holding us accountable to the Word of God. Much heartache is avoided when we treasure our membership in the church of Jesus Christ as a precious thing.

We'll look at a few more lessons from Agur next week. For now, chew on the ones we explored today. Choose silence when popping off does no one any good. Be Self-aware. Always be on guard against the perils of self-importance. Be satisfied. Your walk with God is more important than any worldly treasure. Finally, be submissive. In love, God placed us under the oversight and care of others. Don't cringe at the idea. Treasure it. It serves to shape us for usefulness to God.