

## Advice from Agur, Part 2

Proverbs 30:18-33

After Rafiq Abdul Mortland committed a string of robberies in Minnesota, he received a sentence of eight to ten years. Mortland received the nickname "The Rolaid's Robber" because he would ask store clerks for antacid tablets while the felony was in progress. He said he needed the antacid because of the stress that came from committing crimes.

What does a fellow have to do to live out his days without feeling all that pressure? In Mortland's case, a career change could help, but for most of us, the solution is even simpler. When this world ceases to revolve around me, it becomes less stressful and more fascinating. When I stop pretending that I can know all things, a great burden is lifted from my back. When I abandon my delusions of self-sufficiency and come to grips with my ultimate dependence on the gracious mercies of a heavenly Provider, then, I can cease striving for my place in this world and simply enjoy it. That summarizes what Agur has taught us thus far.

Were it not for the first nine verses of *Proverbs 30*, the remainder of the chapter might just seem like one man's random observations of the world. They would be interesting, but they would also seem disjointed, as if one had nothing to do with another. However, because of the unifying premise that Agur established, we see much more in the individual observations. All of Agur's advice emerges from his sense of who he was in God's world.

Agur acknowledged the severe limitations of his own wisdom, identifying himself as "the most ignorant of men" (verse 2). He asked a series of rhetorical questions about Who controls this creation, questions that immediately draw the readers attention to God. Agur knew that he lacked the capacity to discover God for himself, so he concluded that whenever God does make Himself known to man, that revelation is of great value: "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him" (verse 5).

Finally, Agur gave voice to one of the most amazing prayers in the Bible. Agur was so unsure of his own wisdom and his own character that would not presume to articulate his own assessment of what his life required. He would prefer to trust God in such matters:

<sup>8</sup>Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

<sup>9</sup>Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the LORD?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. – verses 8, 9

Agur assumes the posture of one who is all-trusting rather than all-knowing. What a difference it makes in how he takes in the world around him. His advice is not jaded, for he is not viewing the world through a filter of unholy ambition or human pride. Agur observes the creation in the context of the Creator, and his conclusions are reliable life lessons for genuinely wise, contented and godly living. Last week, we considered four of Agur's admonitions for living. They were:

- I. Be Silent** (There are penalties for popping-off, whether from nosiness or meanness.)
- II. Be Self-Aware** (No outward image can ever compensate for inner defilement.)
- III. Be Satisfied** (Greed and other human appetites are insatiable.)
- IV. Be Submissive** (Casting off valid restraints over our lives has severe consequences.)

Let us continue exploring the observations of this unpretentious sage named Agur ...

## V. Be Spellbound verses 18–20

### A. Agur Ponders Three Marvels of Nature verses 18, 19a

<sup>18</sup>“There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand:

<sup>19</sup>the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas ...

In Hebrew literature, the number “three” stood for that which was sufficient and complete.

“Four” intensified the meaning to that which was overwhelming. Agur is expressing his utter amazement at the things he is describing. In this particular three/four observation, the first three wonders of nature are illustrative of a climactic final wonder.

Flight has always fascinated the earthbound mortal. It amazed Agur that a bird as big and powerful as an eagle could defy the laws of gravity with such majesty. Similarly amazing was “the way of a snake on a rock.” The little guy didn’t have any legs. How could he move at all, much less with speed and agility? How could something so cumbersome as a ship even float, much less navigate with grace? One common denominator between these three amazing things was that they leave the observer stunned at their mysterious wonder.

In this age of science, we know far more than an ancient sage could ever know, and we are richer for it. Medicine has found wonderful cures and treatments. Man now understands flight so well that he has caused his own inventions weighing tons to fly beyond the speed of sound. Any high school science teacher can explain how a snake propels itself. We are indeed richer for our advancements, but we are also poorer. Our advances have caused us to cease to marvel at God’s amazing handiwork. Humanity owes its own progress to lessons first taught by the Creator.

### B. Human Romance Is Among Creation’s Greatest Wonders verse 19b

... and the way of a man with a maiden.

Some guys are just more romantic than others. A guest in an elderly couple’s home was impressed at how the husband prefaced every comment to his wife with some endearing term; “Honey, My Love, Darling, Sweetheart.” After 70 years of marriage, the two were still very much in love. While the wife was in the kitchen, the guest leaned over and said to the host, “I think it’s wonderful that after all these years, you still call your wife those loving pet names. What’s the secret to keeping that kind of affection alive?” The old man answered, “I’ll tell you only if you keep it a secret. About ten years ago ... I forgot her real name.”

Agur’s observations of eagles, snakes and birds build to what he considered life’s most wonderful mystery. A “maiden” was a young woman of marrying age, whom a smitten young man would court to win as a bride. What moves the relationship of a man and a woman from a spark to a passion to the deepest physical and emotional intimacy they were ever intended by their Creator to enjoy? All Agur knew for sure was that this was the work of God. In fact, the romance between a man and a woman is so unique that it parallels the divine romance between God and the human race. Romance’s culminating institution, marriage, is a biblical picture of the eternal union between Jesus Christ and His redeemed church.

Today, so-called relationship experts dare to give advice concerning matters of the heart. The sage Agur was *TOO* wise to pretend to be *THAT* wise. He would never suggest that “women are from Venus and men are from Mars.” In fact, the Bible teaches that both were created in God’s image and that the most promising key to making the most of their union is for both of them to serve and love the other with a sense of the presence of God.

## **C. Beware the Ease with which God’s Beautiful Gifts Are Soiled verse 20**

<sup>20</sup>“This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’”

Why would Agur spoil the lovely romantic picture he just painted by introducing us to this vile old adutress? We must remain acutely aware that what God created to be wonderful can be quickly rendered base and common. This “adulteress” personifies sexual misconduct. “Eating” euphemizes her sexual activity. “Wiping her mouth” after the act communicates that she sees it all as quite unremarkable. She is not immoral, so much as amoral. She sees no connection between her behavior in this matter and her innate goodness. “I’ve done nothing wrong,” she claims.

This adulteress vividly describes our own age. The intimacy shared between a man and a woman has one legitimate context, marriage. In God’s eyes, we cheat ourselves when we bypass romance and the covenant union that is to culminate in the sexual union. In the culture at large, there is little stigma to any kind of nonviolent sexual behavior. The mantra is that anything between consenting adults is okay. Indiscretion by leaders in this area is not viewed as a reflection on character or on the ability to lead. Entertainment media of every kind celebrates sensual pleasure. The culture simply wipes its mouth and claims, “I’ve done nothing wrong.” God’s beauty has given way to hedonistic ugliness.

## **VI. Be Sensible verses 21–23**

<sup>21</sup>“Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up:

<sup>22a</sup>a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food,

<sup>23</sup>an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.

### **A. Human Notions of Justice and Fairness Seldom Make this World a Better Place**

Man is prone to bitterness regarding the social inequities he perceives. In his puny thinking, it isn’t right that some men are born kings and others subjects. It isn’t right that some are born rich and others poor. All playing fields must be leveled, but in his pursuit of justice, he often does more harm than good. There is a way to work for social justice, but thoughtlessly casting off the current order is not it. When the Bolsheviks revolted, murdering the Romanoff dynasty, no one would argue that the age of communism that followed was better than life under the Tsars.

### **B. It Is Better to Leave Some Things in God’s Hands than to Try and “Fix” Them**

Some of our attempts to fix society backfire, creating even greater injustice. Through revolution, insurrection or murder, a king can be replaced by a servant. Is the kingdom better off? If the servant does not grow into the role, he may prove more brutal than the king he replaced, or, he may be a mere pawn manipulated by powers behind the throne.

In the Old Testament, the term “fool” described a man’s moral character more than it described his intellectual limitations. When a fool becomes rich, or “full of food,” there is no potential for gratitude to God and there will be no generosity toward the poor forthcoming. He will likely be a very egocentric man living in the tiny world of self.

This unloved married woman should evoke our sympathy, but not where you might think. The grammar actually conveys an unlovable woman who finally lands a husband or is married because some poor dumbmarried her for her wealth or beauty but overlooked her character. The *King James Version* calls her an “odious” woman who is married. In other words, our pity is appropriate, but it should not be directed toward the woman, but toward everyone around her – her husband, her kids, her household servants. She is a shrew. She is a battleaxe.

The fourth picture is ambiguous in the original language. It may refer to a maidservant who is taken as a new wife by a rotten husband who is discarding his old wife. That's not right! But, it could also refer to a maidservant who replaces the mistress upon her death. That seems less scandalous, but the household is still thrown into turmoil because of the envy of the other maidservants reluctant to serve one who was once one of them.

Sometimes, it is better to wait on God than to take matters into our own hands. The Apostle Paul never sought to purge slavery from his world, but slavery has largely disappeared because of the gospel Paul preached. Social change enacted politically is often nullified in the next political cycle. When the mind of Christ infiltrates a people, society is transformed. The changes may seem tediously slow, but our call is to live as the salt of the earth by which God effects change, not to forcefully impose change ourselves.

## **VII. Be Smart verses 24–28**

<sup>24</sup>Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise:

<sup>25</sup>Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer;

<sup>26</sup>coney are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags;

<sup>27</sup>locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks;

<sup>28</sup>a lizard can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces.

### **A. Agur Finds Valuable Life Lessons in Four Little Creatures**

It is hard to study ants when every time we see them we are intent on poisoning them or stepping on them. In the Bible, the ant is a picture of foresight and industriousness. The coney was a little "rock badger" that lived in the rugged terrain near the Dead Sea. A coney might be easy pickings for an eagle that can swoop down at speeds up to 90 mph to snatch its prey, but the rocky terrain inhabited by the coney gives the eagle pause. The eagle swoops more cautiously. In turn, the coney has more opportunity to elude the hunter. Agur saw in this a lesson on resourcefulness.

One locust is just a bug. That's why they travel in swarms of thousands. In this, Agur recognized and admired the power of organization, community and a common cause. Agur noted the adaptability of the lizard. There is no place that is inaccessible to him

### **B. Nature Proves that Wisdom Is a Better Commodity than Raw Power**

Are these critters really wise? Are they really industriousness, resourceful, organized and adaptable? Or, do they simply act on instinct? I suppose it is more a matter of instinct than of the innate wisdom of the creatures, but those instincts came from somewhere. Those instincts testify to the amazing wisdom of the Creator. God placed those instincts in those feeble creatures to teach man the wisdom not of nature, but of nature's Creator.

Only man is made in God's image. We don't have the instinct of the ant. We must choose to embrace or reject the industriousness it teaches us. We are more intelligent than the coney. God has provided him with an instinct to find refuge in the rocks. Will we choose to find our refuge in the rock which is God's self-revelation by His Word and in Christ? We can crush any single locust, but instinctively, together they are a mighty army. Will we choose the safety and community of the church or insist on living stubbornly and independently of others? Will we pursue the adaptability that instinctively belongs to the lizard, so that we can be servants of God before any audience and under any kind of external pressure?

## **VIII. Be Secure verses 29–31**

<sup>29</sup>There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing:

<sup>30</sup>a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing;

<sup>31</sup>a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king with his army around him.

## **A. Agur Notes that Leadership Is Endorsed by Nature**

We call the lion “the king of the beasts,” and in the Bible, the lion is a symbol of royalty and might. The “strutting rooster” is the most formidable character in the chicken coop. The “he-goat” is the dominant animal in his flock. Each image is of a creature that stands out in its circle, not strutting out of empty arrogance, but because it is equipped by its Creator to be a leader. It’s no brag, just fact. So, what does that teach a man?

## **B. Strong Leadership Has Its Place**

Part of that place is to secure our safety and security. We are rebellious by nature, that is, by our fallen nature. Sinful pride causes us to recoil against the idea that we need anyone to lead us, but creation testifies that there is a place for strong leaders, for “a king with his army around him.” He should be respected, not disdained. Solomon was the richest and most powerful ruler of his day. I suspect that he was also the target for all kinds of envy and scrutiny. That’s how we tend to view those who are in authority over us.

Agur was a well-adjusted man. He knew how small he was. He knew how dependent he was on God. Because Agur was easily contented, he did not scrutinize and resent the authorities over his life. He recognized them as ordained by God and, ultimately accountable to God. In the world, leadership is essential to order. Class envy and social discontent seldom accomplish meaningful gains. In the church, overseers are critical to our spiritual well-being. A mature Christian recognizes the value of leaders:

<sup>17</sup>Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. – Hebrews 13:17

## **Conclusion - Be Still verses 32, 33**

<sup>32</sup>“If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth!

<sup>33</sup>For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife.”

Agur pulls his oracle together with a powerful summary, drawing on lessons he has touched upon. If you have played the fool by arrogantly living as if God was not present – if you have lived as if this world revolves around you, indifferent to others – if you have resented the human kings and cosmic powers that rule your life – if you have cheapened the precious gifts of God by taking romance or nature for granted – if you have lived greedily or rebelliously – then you have trusted yourself more than you have trusted the One Who holds this creation together.

Stop striving. Stop being resentful. Stop complaining. Stop sinning. You will bring misery and strife upon yourself as surely as “... churning the milk produces butter, and twisting the nose produces blood.” God is on the throne. Accept His ways. Enjoy His world. Trust His hand. Learn to be content no matter what you have or where you are.