

Wisdom's Limits

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 30. The sayings of Agur, son of Jacke, an inspired utterance. This man's utterance to Ethiel. I am weary, God, but I can prevail.

Surely I am only a brute, not a man. I do not have human understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained the knowledge of the Holy One. Who has gone up to heaven, and who has come down?

Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son?

Surely you know. Every word of God is flawless. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

Two things I ask of you, Lord. Do not refuse me before I die. Keep falsehood and lies far from me. Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

[1 : 06] Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you, and say, Who is the Lord? Or may we become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God? Do not slander a servant to their master, or they will curse you, and you will pay for it.

There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers. Those who are pure in their own eyes, yet are not cleansed of their filth. Those whose eyes are ever so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful.

Those whose teeth are swords, and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth and the needy from among the human race. The leech has two daughters.

Give, give, they cry. There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say enough. The grave, the grave, the barren womb, land which is never satisfied with water, and fire which never says enough.

The eye that mocks a father, that scorns an aged mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures. There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand.

[2 : 21] 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, and the way of a man with a young woman. This is the way of an adulterous woman.

She eats and wipes her mouth and says, I've done nothing wrong. Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up. A servant who becomes king, a godless fool who gets plenty to eat, a contemptible woman who gets married, and a servant who displaces her mistress.

Four things on the earth are small, yet they are extremely wise. Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up food for the summer. Hieraxes are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags.

Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks. A lizard can be caught in the hand, yet it is found in king's palaces. There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing.

A lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing. A strutting cock, a he-goat, and a king secure against revolt.

[3 : 37] If you play the fool and exalt yourself, or if you plan evil, clasp your hands together over your mouth. For as churning cream produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you. Thank you very much for reading Simon. It's quite an epic passage, isn't it?

We are going to make our way through this together. It's just, you're going to have to stay with me. There's quite a lot of brain power required tonight, but it will be worth it, I promise.

It's an absolutely stunning chapter of the Bible. So, my name is Matthew Todd. I'm a member of the church here at St. Silas, and I served here for a year as a ministry trainee as well.

It's a great pleasure to be able to bring God's word to you tonight. So, the last two weeks of July, this summer, I was a leader at two scripture union camps.

[4 : 40] I just want to tell you a story from the second of these. It was for older children, aged 12 to 18. And we had an extremely challenging situation with a 12-year-old boy who was prone to fits of frustration, often erupting in violence.

There was also a language barrier which made it very hard to communicate with him. I had struggled on for days, trying to make him feel loved and secure. But one night, after he told me, I hate you, and demanded I leave him alone, I made the decision that I was just going to give him some space and let him work it out.

The following day, he flew into a rage and injured four other children. As the team leader and I discussed the situation, we found ourselves at a total loss as to what to do.

Sending him home was an option, but we knew a bit about the environment he would be returning to and how his parents would be likely to react. On the other hand, we did not feel there was much more we could do to get through to him, unless he chose to open up.

So we found ourselves crying out to God for the wisdom that surpassed our own limited human understanding. Let me leave that hanging for now, as we come to look at this penultimate chapter of Proverbs together.

[5 : 57] We know very little about Agur, the author of this chapter, but his words are described as an inspired utterance, meaning they're shot through with wisdom from God.

And this passage clearly has the hallmarks of that wisdom. Agur presents his utterances with humility and with sincere prayer. Furthermore, like so much of Proverbs, the words ring with truth.

We see the wisdom written 3,000 years ago still demonstrably evident in our world today. And when we look at wisdom literature or poetry in the Bible, we can be at risk of overanalyzing and treating it as a problem to be solved.

What does this mean? Rather than a truth to be accepted. It's the difference between me standing on the side of the pool and describing to you in great detail the temperature and consistency of the water or simply inviting you to jump in.

There are real gems of wisdom to be found in this passage. So my intention tonight is that rather than give you a standard three-point sermon, we're going to work through it together, explore the words, explore the imagery together, and I hope uncover the divine wisdom within.

[7 : 08] So let's start at the beginning. I'm weary, God, but I can prevail. Surely I am only a brute, not a man. I do not have human understanding.

I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One. Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?

Who has established the ends of the earth? What is his name? And what is the name of his son? Surely you know. Every word of God is flawless. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. So this is the part of the introduction to his utterances.

And Agar is expressing here the same sentiments that I described, trying to discern a way forward with the boy at camp. I am weary, God. It captures that sense of exhaustion and exertion unique to the search for wisdom.

[8 : 08] Agar goes on to say that he does not have human understanding, let alone divine wisdom. It's the same feeling we get when faced with ethical dilemmas.

That sense of, oh, what do I do? When people we love and respect severely disagree with one another, it leaves us with that sense of emptiness and inadequacy. Or at least it should.

Because when we lose sight of the limits of human wisdom, we're in dangerous territory. The very first sin of humanity was to believe that lie that human understanding can be equal or superior to God's wisdom.

And Agar goes on to poetically demonstrate the utter folly of believing that we as creatures can grasp the wisdom of God the Creator. Look at verse 4 there.

Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered the wind? Et cetera, et cetera. What is his name? What is the name of his son? Surely you know. There's a hint of irony, sarcasm in that.

[9 : 12] Of course we don't know. We can't do any of these things or even understand how anyone could. Because we are not the creator. We are creatures, created beings.

Yet, even here, there is the mystery that God has chosen to reveal himself to us. He has told us his name.

He is Yahweh, the great I Am. And we know what Agar did not. We know the name of his son, Jesus. We'll come back to that later.

Every word of God is flawless. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

Fairly self-explanatory. Then he goes on as he concludes his introduction. Two things I ask of you, Lord. Do not refuse me before I die.

[10 : 09] Keep falsehood and lies far from me. And this is so important here. Give me neither poverty nor riches. But give me only my daily bread. 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. There's a lot going on in those two verses there. Eight and nine.

Which I want to just unpack in some detail. And then thereafter, the rest, as you see, will all link into that. And we'll go much faster. But that is a powerful prayer. I wonder if you've ever prayed something similar.

It's telling, isn't it, that we find it so hard to ask for just enough. But no more than enough. And this is despite all the evidence around us that would suggest that excessive riches can be extremely dangerous.

Jesus was quite clear about this when he frequently lamented how hard it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. In fact, he went as far as to say that if left to humans, it would be impossible.

[11 : 15] But fortunately, we have a God that laughs at the impossible. It's important for us to be aware that most of us here tonight, and I don't want to make too many assumptions, but we are living in a society that is immensely privileged.

We live in an age where we can see clearly that our work and efforts create a degree of success. We have control over so many things that historically we've never been able to control. And the wonders of human technological achievement might lead us to believe that in time we can rule it all.

As a society, on the whole, we fall into the category of too much. And according to the proverb, we will have disowned God.

Well, look around you. People have forgotten their creator. And they ask, who is the Lord? Even those who acknowledge the existence of a God often do not give him his place as the one who established the ends of the earth.

They want to be able to control him and his words. The way they control everything else in their lives. Now, statistics can be limited in their application, but I do think it's important to remember that only 7% of the world identifies as atheist.

[12 : 32] And of those, there are large numbers in countries like China who may secretly have a faith. And without probing to discern the sincerity and nature of the faith held by the other 93%, it should really make us ask why our society has so casually disowned God.

Why is believing that there is no God considered the rational position and belief in a relational God something that demands justification? Do we consider ourselves so intellectually and morally superior to the majority of the world, both past and present?

I mean, look around you. Look at the intricacy of the human body, the majesty of the cosmos. Creation is one massive question mark that demands an answer. Belief in an all-powerful creator is a perfectly rational position.

Don't let the arrogance and hubris within you or around you convince you otherwise. How much wealth and power would it take to go up to heaven and come down?

We deny God so casually. Surely we know? No. Of course not. Because no matter how rich we become, we will never become God.

[13 : 49] However, let's not be blind to the flip side, the equally dangerous blight of poverty. There has historically been an unhealthy romanticizing of the poor that suggested that there was a spiritual perfection to be found in poverty.

This is still residual in some of our thinking, the idea that God wants us to have nothing. The less that we have, the closer we will be to him. This isn't the way the Bible explains it at all.

All the way through the Old and New Testaments, God's people are commanded to care for the poor. The early church sent financial contributions to other congregations who were struggling. And James goes as far as to say that our attitude to those in need is one of the most important indicators of our Christianity.

Having grown up in areas of severe deprivation, let me assure you that poverty is a disease. There is nothing romantic or spiritual about the trauma that it breeds or the damage it does to self-confidence and imagination.

As Agur rightly points out, when we live in poverty, we are very vulnerable to certain types of sin. When we become poor, we are at risk of stealing.

[14 : 58] In our society, that might manifest itself in a physical sense of stealing something that does not belong to us. But it can be much more subtle. When we envy another's possessions, we are stealing from them spiritually.

When we feel we have been dealt a low blow by life, it's easy for this to turn into a general resentment for entire groups of people. And I will never stop flying this flag because I think it is so dangerous right now.

Identity politics have no place in Christianity. That is to say, we don't get to join in with our secular friends and family in neatly dividing people into categories and raising up one category as a victim whilst blaming another for all the problems of the world.

To be clear, that's politically neutral. Don't blame socialists. Don't blame conservatives. Don't blame feminists. Don't blame white, straight, middle-class males.

As Christians, we know better. Our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against the forces of evil in the spiritual realms. I'm not saying don't have political positions. In fact, I believe we should and we must take them seriously.

[16 : 10] They can be tools that God uses to contain evil. But if Jesus is your Lord, then the person on the wrong side of the Brexit debate or the political landscape is a soul to be saved, not an enemy to be thwarted.

Great wealth and crippling poverty both blind us to God's goodness. Do we dare to pray that we might be spared from both? It's been important to spend time unpacking these implications as the body of Agur's utterances very much develops this tension between riches and poverty and the potential pitfalls of both.

The Proverbs speak for themselves for the most part and don't need much explanation. Look at verse 10 with me. We see here a very vivid depiction of a rich and arrogant person.

Not necessarily someone who has physical wealth, but certainly someone who considers themselves superior to others for whatever reason. Note the seamless interweaving of the way these people view themselves and the way they treat others as a result.

Next, we have the flip side. The entitled person who, for want of riches or excess of it, can never be satisfied. Look at verse 15. The leech has two daughters.

[17 : 50] Give, give, they cry. There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say enough. The grave, the barren womb, land which is never satisfied with water, and fire which never says enough.

The eye that mocks a father, that scorns an aged mother, will be pecked tight by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures. So this is the first of six numerical sayings, which we'll hear more about later, where it says three things and then four things.

Note also the repeated idea of respect for parents being a hallmark of righteousness for both rich and poor. We hopefully can all connect on an emotional level with respecting our parents. But there's also a spiritual dimension to this.

Whether you had wonderful, so the spiritual dimension is that when we honor our parents, we rehearse the spiritual discipline of honoring our creator.

So whether you had wonderful parents like mine, or even if you feel your parents did nothing but harm you, they deserve our love and respect simply on merit of being our parents.

[18 : 58] How much more so should we give respect to our heavenly father who gives us every good thing? The first sign of society has disowned God is that family values will start to crumble.

Furthermore, verse 16 emphasizes the place of children in the constant battle that we're locked in until Christ returns. The grave is never satisfied, no matter how many victims it claims.

But by God's grace, we are compelled to keep producing life also. And so the generations continue, century after century. This is another thing we start to see questioned now.

Why should we have children? What does it achieve? Is it right to bring children into such a world? Perhaps we're the first generation in history of mankind to seriously ask that question.

But the answer is a resounding yes. In this present age, the womb is the weapon that fights the grave. It's not over until God says it's over. Verse 18 there.

[20 : 01] There are three things that are too amazing for me. Four that I do not understand. 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. And the way of a man with a young woman.

I do love these numerical sayings. They're a bit like riddles, aren't they? Like asking, what do an eagle, a snake, and a ship, and a man with a young woman have in common? The difference is we get the answer before the riddle.

Three of these are amazing to me, and all four are beyond my understanding. We cannot predict the courses of any of these elements, and far less the mysterious connection of young lovers.

We had a little too much of this mysterious connection at my last camp, but it is truly amazing to behold. It's like observing magnetism.

An invisible force with untold power. However, we can't control it, we can't understand it, and yet we accept it without question for the most part. Do read Song of Songs if you want an in-depth meditation on the power of romantic love.

[21 : 09] But moving swiftly on, verse 20 there. This is the way of an adulterous woman. She eats and wipes her mouth and says, I've done nothing wrong.

So we get a quick reminder of the flip side of romantic love here. That is reminiscent of Lady Folly in the introduction of Proverbs. Sexual gratification and even love can be used entirely selfishly.

And when we do so, we squander one of God's greatest gifts to us. I would hope that we would not be counted among those who would gratify themselves selfishly and then say, I've done nothing wrong.

But they were all around Agur and they are all around us now. We must be very careful not to subtly accept a sexual ethic that is at its core self-serving and damaging to true love.

When we do so, we not only damage true love, but we're in danger of limiting our understanding of Jesus' totally selfless love for us as the church. Verse 21 there.

[22 : 17] Under three things the earth trembles. Under four it cannot bear up. A servant who becomes a king. A godless fool who gets plenty to eat. A contemptible woman who gets married.

And a servant who displaces her mistress. So here we touch on social order once again. And it's within the framework of Agur's prayer that he should have neither too much nor too little.

Any three of these things will put great pressure on society. But all four together will cause a culture to collapse. I don't want to say much more than that other than to point out two things that I hope are self-evident.

Firstly, we're talking general... How do you say that word? Generalities. I'm talking generalities here, not individual cases. So one servant who becomes king will not shake society.

But if every servant feels entitled to be a king, we invite disaster. God breathed into chaos in creation and brought order.

[23 : 18] He divided land and sea, night and day, male and female, and gave them all their place. We need to be very cautious of people who invite chaos into society for chaos' sake by overturning every social norm and expecting things to be better for it.

Secondly, we need to take note of the moral dimension here. When the godless, the contemptible, and the treacherous receive good things, it shakes the foundations of society.

Add to that a breakdown of social structures and hierarchies, and the whole thing can come tumbling down. And in the Western world today, we are seeing all these elements clearly.

There's a general disdain for authority. The most enjoy a level of prosperity, while very few acknowledge that all blessing comes from God. In the dazzling celebrity culture, morality has been reinvented and is mutely aped by envious consumers.

And through it all, we're told, and we believe, that we deserve more. So we walk all over each other to get it. And though Proverbs has wisdom for the whole world, it is written with God's people especially in mind.

[24 : 42] So it's essential that we don't hear these judgments as condemning the world while we sit in our ivory tower and shake our heads self-righteously. Proverbs merely points out truths about human nature.

These might look different in a church context, but we as God's people are always in desperate need of constant reform. We need to regularly be asking ourselves, does my church demonstrate God's values, or are we simply trying to fit in with the world around us?

Moving on, verse 24. Four things on earth are small, yet they're extremely wise. Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer.

Hyraxes are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags. Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks. A lizard can be caught with a hand, yet it is found in king's palaces.

There are three things that are stately in their stride, four that move with stately bearing. A lion mighty among beasts who retreats before nothing. A strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king secure against revolt.

[25 : 53] Again, I don't think it's helpful or necessary to explain every word of these Proverbs, but rather to make some observations. Firstly, it's worth noting that we are to learn from nature. God's DNA runs through creation.

His fingerprints are all over his workmanship. When the Bible mentions the natural world and its poetry, it's never by accident. It should remind us of the once perfect creation that once declared God's character and being so clearly.

That same creation is broken, but not destroyed. This is why believers and atheists alike can have transcendent experiences when surrounded by nature.

It's also why most of us would never question that the natural world needs to be protected and cared for. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Romans. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

He says that in Romans 1, verse 20. So what are we to learn from nature? On this occasion, we are to learn the practical value of wisdom.

[27 : 08] All the animals mentioned in the first four Proverbs are small or helpless, but the wisdom God has given them gives them great advantages. Ants by timely industry, hyraxes by seeking shelter, locusts by working together in strict discipline, and a lizard by accessing places barred to others.

God has gifted animals with the wisdom they need to thrive. It is fascinating to see the way that creatures strive to overcome their challenging environments. But how much more has he gifted us?

The power and potential of the human mind is staggering. We are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made. In the final three Proverbs, verses 29 to 31, Agur describes confident creatures, culminating in the king, secure against revolt.

The way these Proverbs are positioned draws our attention to the nobility of humanity. Even the animals know their place in the world and are confident in their position.

We, as stewards of creation, should have that same confidence and assurance. We are here for a purpose, with work to be done. It is God's world, and it is his prerogative to order it as he pleases.

[28 : 30] The implication also is that a kingdom that is built on wisdom will be secure from the social turmoil of revolt. A wise leader is essential for national harmony.

But where do we find such a leader? The proverb ends with a solemn warning for fools who seek power. If you play the fool and exalt yourself, or if you plan evil, clap your hand over your mouth.

For as churning cream produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife. In light of all that has been said, we see that foolishness, which is synonymous with godlessness in Proverbs, is deeply damaging, both for individuals and society.

Even if we do not plan evil, how many of us play the fool and exalt ourselves? How many of us feel that we deserve more than the hand we've been dealt?

I mean, let's get real. There are some brilliant politicians, headteachers, and bosses, but I think we all know that they are the exception not the rule. We live in a world where we turn the blind eye to fools who exalt themselves, and even to those who plan evil.

[30 : 03] But most of us, given the opportunity, would do no better. The earth is trembling under the weight of so much foolishness, and we continue to feed the dragon.

So how much longer can it bear up? How long do you have to churn the butter? How far do you have to twist the nose? Well, the answer is far enough.

We don't know when for sure, but we do know that if we keep twisting, eventually there will be blood. I want to bring you back to where we started.

A 12-year-old boy is shouting up at me, I hate you. Leave me alone. Two thoughts crossed my mind in quick succession.

The first was anger. How dare you? I've sacrificed everything for you. You have no idea what I've suffered for your sake. The second was sadness.

[31 : 10] This boy has just said exactly what the Western world has been saying to God for decades. I hate you. Leave me alone.

And God is angry with us. Make no mistake. We've taken his priceless gifts and sacrificed them on the altars of our own self-worship.

Friends, it is a travesty that your family and your neighbors think that they can disown the creator and sustainer of every good thing without consequence. Every day we are churning and twisting and stirring up anger and it produces strife.

It can't go on. But how has God responded? The same way he's always responded. With grace.

With wide arms. And an open door. The boy at that camp stirred up anger and yes, it did produce strife.

[32 : 16] But at that camp, we had a perfect leader who knew exactly what to do. That leader died for that boy 2,000 years ago to give him a second chance.

So we gave him that chance. Now, I've been in many situations when grace and mercy have had the opposite effect of what I'm about to describe. But we need to remember that we are starting to see a new generation who might never have experienced genuine Christian grace.

We spoke with those who'd been injured and explained that what had happened to them was unacceptable and that action would be taken. But we also asked them how they would like to respond.

All of them chose forgiveness. When we explained this to the perpetrator, it was as if something snapped inside of him. There was lots of weeping and very little talking.

What we witnessed over the next few days was nothing short of a transformation. We're not in control of what happens to him from now on in the environment he's returning to.

[33 : 29] But the God who created the world is still in the business of changing lives. No earthly ruler will ever be able to rule with perfect wisdom except one.

Jesus has overcome every evil. His compassion is boundless. His wisdom is unlimited. To close, some words from William Cowper.

judge not the Lord with feeble sense, but trust him for his grace. Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain. God is his own interpreter and he shall make it plain. Amen.

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