

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 17, Proverbs 30:1-9 Agur

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This is Dr. Knut Heim and his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 17, Proverbs chapter 30, verses 1 through 9, introduction to Agur.

Welcome to lesson 17 on the Biblical book of Proverbs.

Here now we are going to look at chapter 30 of the book of Proverbs. This is the penultimate chapter. And for most of us, including myself even as I give this lecture here today, the most enigmatic in so many different ways of all of the chapters of this fantastic, amazing, and exciting book.

The reason why this chapter is so enigmatic is because, first of all, in the opening verse, we are confronted with a new character who has authored, at least this is what we are told here in verse 1, has authored the entirety of this chapter, but even as we are told about that, we recognize very quickly as we read on that the first nine verses are a kind of a coherent section, whereas verses 10 to 31 are composed of a number of very interesting groups of categories, of statements about various aspects of life that seem quite incoherent. I will try and see whether we can find some coherence there, but even as I do so in this lecture, there is a niggling thought at the back of my head that makes me wonder whether I am just trying to impose an inner coherence between the different parts because of the typical Western philosophical mindset that I belong to, of course, as a European, that likes to impose structure and coherence even when there is none. So let's see where we get to, but I want to, first of all, read to you the first two verses of this chapter, and I will first read it from the New Revised Standard Version, then I will read it from the New International Version, and then I will go back to the New Revised Standard Version, which I personally prefer.

But there is a reason why I read both of these, and I will explain that in a moment. So here we go. The heading itself is the words of Agur, son of Jakel, an oracle.

And then the oracle begins. Thus says the man, I am weary, O God, I am weary, O God, how can I prevail? Just hold that for a moment. Now I am going to read from the New International Version.

The sayings of Agur, son of Jakel, an inspired utterance. This man's utterance to Ethiel. Do you see the difference between the two? Let me just read to you again from the NRSV.

The words of Agur, son of Jakel, an oracle. In the NRV for an oracle it says uninspired utterance. That's kind of a rephrasing of more or less the same kind of thing, as we will see in a moment.

But then the next phrase is quite different. Thus says the man, I am weary, O God, I am weary, O God, how can I prevail? Whereas in the NRV it says this man's utterance to Ethiel. And then also the phrase, I am weary, God, but I can prevail.

What is going on here? If we believe that scripture is inspired by God, and if we follow one of the great slogans of the Reformation, of the *claritas scripturae*, the clarity of scripture, how come two of the very best modern English translations that we have are so different? This, of course, is one of the arguments that is often raised by Muslim believers, whose Quran is very much more straightforward in many ways, where we don't have the kinds of problems often associated. Of course, in the Quran spirituality of Islam, the Quran is not supposed to be translated, but always read in the original. Now, the original of the NRV and the NRSV is the same, but the interpretation is different.

And once we have a translation of it, it looks like we have two different versions of one and the same thing. No, we don't have two different versions. We have two different translations of the same version.

But how does that then come about? Well, this is one of the reasons why I said earlier that this is one of the most enigmatic, the most unusual parts of the Book of Proverbs. And it really boils down to the complexity and uncertainty of what the Hebrew text itself says. Now, in this lecture, I cannot go into all of the detail of the Hebrew itself, and if I did so, it would probably be rather tedious and very, very detailed.

But simply to say that the words in Hebrew are highly unusual, they're very rare, and also the grammatical and syntactical construction, especially of the first line in verse one, which is either translated, this man's utterance to Eziel, or thus says the man, I am weary, O God. The God bit in the NRSV reflects the *iel* of Eziel in the NRV. And we just don't really know what Eziel is.

The NRV is suggesting that Eziel is actually the personal name of a person who is otherwise unattested in scripture or elsewhere. It's an unusual name as well. Whereas the NRSV thinks that this may be a compound noun, or rather two different nouns that are close together and were written together, but should be read separately.

And so, they separate Eziel, Et, and ale, and Et is something like weariness, my weariness, and ale is God. Hence, we have a different translation. Now, how does this come about? Well, we don't really know because we were not there.

But I now want to say something about the identity of Agur, son of Jaki. And again, we don't really know who this person is. We have similar names in Mesopotamia and elsewhere outside of Israel.

And therefore, some people suggest that Agur actually was a foreigner. Ethnically speaking, a non-Israelite. However, as we will see in a moment, his theology is thoroughly Israelite.

So, was he an Israelite with just a very unusual name, including his father's name being unusual? Or was he a foreigner who perhaps converted to the faith of ancient Israel? And if the second option is true, and of course, we cannot possibly know, but I tend towards the second option, although this is, of course, not more than informed guesswork. But if he was a foreigner who had come to faith in the God of Israel and is now contributing a philosophical, quasi-philosophical reflection, perhaps partly, well, clearly partly on his life's experience as a foreigner with a new faith, then this may possibly explain why the opening words in the sections and also some later words in the chapter are so difficult and unusual. It may actually be the case that some of the unusualness of the language is that Hebrew is his second language, not his native language.

That may explain some of the idiosyncrasies of the unusualness of what Agur is sharing here in his reflection. Be that as it may, the next question that arises, here, fortunately, the NRSV and the NIV are more or less in agreement. NRSV says that the words that we are about to read and talk about are an oracle, whereas the NIV says they are an inspired utterance.

Now, oracles are often referred to when a reference is made to sermons or short poetic reflections of the prophets of Israel. So, some of the statements of Isaiah, for example, in the book of Isaiah, are called a *masah*, which is usually translated oracle, as here in the NRSV. And the opening line which says, the words of Agur, son of Jaque, an oracle, then would, *masah*, the word *masah*, would then explain the words of Agur as a certain type of utterance or communication, namely, as the NIV makes it more clear, an inspired utterance similar to a prophet.

The reason, however, why the NIV says inspired utterance rather than straightforwardly oracle is because usually when we have oracles in the prophets, those oracles largely, not exclusively, but largely, record in direct speech the very words of God. Whereas in Agur's reflection that follows, only very little, if anything at all, can be ascribed to being words of God. And we will come to that in a minute when we look at verse 4. But for now, the reason why probably the NIV has a good way of explaining what's going on is because we have one instance in 2 Samuel 23 where David, in his final words shortly before his death, talks about his own reflections on his life's journey and bibliography in which he describes himself as a

man, the man, in this very similar expression, and then says he now is about to give a masah, an oracle, similar perhaps to Agur.

And what we then have is really a grateful reflection of David on his life's journey under God and God's blessings. And so it seems to be the case that in this instance and in David's instance, oracle does refer to an inspired utterance in the sense that it has to do with God. It is a theological reflection.

But it does not, although it claims to be inspired, it does not have to be consisting of entirely or even largely of divine speech. Having said all this, to make it even more complicated, there is actually a place name not far outside of Israel that is called Masah. And we've mentioned already that the names both Agur and Jake are recorded as foreign names.

So, it could of course also be the case, and some English translations and other translations reflect this, that actually this opening introduction says, the words of Agur, son of Jake, from Masah, from the region of Masah. Can you see just how complicated all of this is? Now, is that a problem? Well, it's a problem for people like me because we have to try and work out what all of this means. Ultimately, I think, not much is gained or lost by trying to find the absolute truth of what this really means.

Because what truly counts is that clearly what follows is included as part of scripture and therefore is an inspired utterance. And whether it is done by someone from Masah or whether we are told it really is an inspired utterance does not really change both the importance and the relevance and the truthfulness of what is then being recorded in the following verses. Having said all of this, this opening that is so complex and difficult to understand may very well have contributed to the fact that this chapter is probably one of the most neglected or understudied chapters in the biblical book of Proverbs.

There are other reasons which we will come to in a minute, but this is one of them. So, having just cleared the way a little bit through the rather obscure opening of this race, I want to suggest gently and tentatively that what we possibly have here is a contribution to the Bible from an originally non-Israelite person who has come to faith in the God of Israel and is now reflecting probably near the end of his life, similar to David, on his bibliography, on his journey. He is doing so very, very briefly, even more briefly than David.

And for David, of course, we have a whole long bibliography in 1 and 2 Samuels. From Argo, we just have these few verses. We now move on to the rest of verse 1 and also verses 2 and 3, because here now, Argo is giving us an insight into what he thinks about himself.

This is almost like a diary entry. It's very honest. It's very self-critical and almost to the point of being self-loathing.

Surprisingly strong statements are being made, which on their own terms seem rather stark and extreme and perhaps even unhealthy. What I will suggest in a few minutes' time, once we have looked at what he is actually saying here, we will try and put what he is saying here into the larger framework of the opening nine verses, because it is only against the background of verses 4 to 9 that I think we will be able to begin to understand why Argo talks about himself in such self-negating ways here. There is a rhetorical reason for that, which I will unpack in a minute.

Here we go. This is what Argo says about himself. I read from the New Revised Standard Version.

First of all, he says, I am weary, O God, how can I prevail? This is, first of all, an application to God. This is phrased in the context of a prayer. I am weary, O God, how can I prevail? This question, how can I prevail, may be spoken at the end, near the end of his life, when he is so old and frail that he just feels that his life is coming to an end.

The question, of how can I prevail, is really a question, of how much longer do I have to live? If he is not at the end of his life, and again, this is only an informed guesswork because we draw the parallel to David's similar statement, at the end of David's life, then if he is younger and more fit and hopes to live longer, then it's more about the fact that he is worn out because of some kind of crisis, and he is now asking God, how can I deal with the challenges that I'm facing? And again, we cannot really know what the situation is. I will suggest, while many of the reasons I've already mentioned point to the fact that he is talking at the end of his life, and this really reads like that, nonetheless, what follows, as we shall see in a moment, it seems that Agur is asking God to help him in a way that suggests that he, Agur, is expecting many more years of life before he dies. So again, we are torn by the text itself in different directions, we are guided in different directions, and we cannot possibly know.

But for me, what clinches is really what Agur says with regard to what he asks from God, which suggests that he is not near the end of his life. I will show that in a moment. So, but what is he saying? He is saying, that not only is he weary, tired, stressed, maybe discouraged, but in his prayer that he brings to God, he continues to say, surely, I am too stupid to be human.

I do not have human understanding. And then verse three, I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One or the Holy Ones. What is all that about? So, if we summarize in one sentence, these verses, these confessions of Agur, that he makes, he is basically saying he is so stupid that he is not even as intelligent as a human being, and he also emphasizes that he has little religious knowledge.

We will come back to that in a moment. Now, this is a really surprising thing to read, near the very end of a collection of collections that are all about knowledge and wisdom. Suddenly, we have this strange character popping up near the end of a book that's all about the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge.

And this person, now in his inspired utterance, under distress, is saying, I am too stupid to be counted a human being with regard to my intelligence, and I have no idea about religious matters. That's what it seems to be coming across. Now, if we just read this at face value and take it literally, and don't try and interpret this in any way, the only impression we get is that this guy is clearly suffering from some kind of depression and self-hatred and that he is exaggerating.

However, if we continue to read with imagination, as I have suggested throughout this lecture series, it is far more likely that what our Guru is doing in his prayer, remember he starts with an address to God, and this is part of his prayer, that he is saying to God, in an exaggerated way, God, I know my intellectual limitations. I am very acutely aware of it, and that is why I am speaking to you, because I want you to help me, as we shall see in a moment. So, it is kind of, if you like, an exaggerated humility that he expresses here in order to motivate God to graciously help him to transcend his present ignorance.

Almost at the level of the famous phrases from Socrates, who used to say, I know that I don't know anything, and in order to know that, one needs to know an awful lot. That is kind of my modern paraphrase of Socrates. So this is the kind of humility, I think, that Argo is expressing here as well.

He has a depth of knowledge of the world, and of God, that helps him to see how little he knows, both about the world and about God. And that is what he is expressing in kind of this rather exaggerated, self-negating way, I believe, in order to motivate God to have pity on him, and to grant him a new revelation, or new insights that would help him to deal with the current crisis. One last thing about this section is, according to the New Revised Standard Version, Argo says, nor have I knowledge of the holy ones, whereas in the NIV it says, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the holy one.

And if we consulted several other English, German, French, or Spanish translations, we would also come across a translation that would say, I have no knowledge of holy things. Why is that? Well, again, we are dealing with poetry, and poetry is often underdetermined, uses specialist language, and uses special kinds of grammatical and syntactical forms that then make it multivalent, and can have three different kinds of meanings. So here it is the case, and that is why we see this reflected in different Bible translations, the lack of knowledge of the holy can be interpreted in three different ways.

Holy things, holy ones as in holy supernatural beings like angels, or other deities, and thirdly, of course, the holy one, namely the God of Israel. Now, I would think, this is, of course, one of the things I've stressed throughout this lecture series, reading imaginatively, probably the best possible translation would be to translate, I have no knowledge of holy things, or holy matters perhaps, which is broad enough to include all three of the possible interpretations, so that the English translation reflects the multivalency, the three possible meanings that Agwe is expressing here. I am religiously ignorant.

That's what he's saying. That doesn't mean, of course, that he doesn't know anything. It means he is aware that there are mysteries available in the heavenly places that he does not know of yet, but yearns to know more about.

And again, when I try to avoid making an interpretive, exegetical decision here, I'm not trying to cop out of hard, exegetical work, but rather at the end of my hard, exegetical work, I want to say this ambiguity is deliberate. It's deliberate ambiguity to create a surplus of meaning and express all three of these all at once. But again, this is one of the reasons why others, most others who don't quite follow my line of imaginative interpretation, say this is a problem text, because how can we know what Agwe means? Well, I say, he means all of it.

And thereby, I solve what other people have described as in the jargon of biblical scholars, an exegetical crux, an unsolvable problem. Well, here we are. I've solved it.

And the reason why I'm laughing, of course, is I'm making a rather bold statement, kind of speaking as a minority of one among very esteemed, highly capable scholars who think differently from me. So even as I say this, and although I believe that I am right, I want to also do this, even as I do it boldly, do it with a sense of humility, realizing that, of course, I might be wrong. I leave you to judge.

Now, so here we are in his prayer. Agur is saying, I don't know things to God, and I'm weary. How can I prevail? Help me prevail.

And then we get to verse 4, and verse 4 opens a sequence of five or six, I think it's five questions, all one in a row, and they come like a machine gun, like a wildfire approach into this discourse, into this dialogue between Agur and his God. And one of the questions that immediately arises is, who is asking the questions? Let's find out. So, verse 3 ends with Agwe saying, I nor have I knowledge of religious things.

And then come the questions. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is the person's name? And what is the name of the person's child? What? Again, we are baffled, and

we think, what is going on here? The first thing we need to, we'll talk about the content of those questions and what they are actually asking in a minute. But to begin with, I think we need to raise the question, who is the speaker here? The most natural understanding, of course, would be to assume that it is still Agur speaking.

So Agur has just said, I don't know nothing, and now he is asking questions in order to find out more. Let's just see whether the kinds of questions that are being asked here would fit into that scenario. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is the person's name? And what is the name of the person's child? Does that really sound like the kinds of questions that Agur would ask? I want to argue that this is not the case.

Because at one level, the answer to the questions is actually implicit in the very way in which the questions are being put. I'm going to give you a one or two word answer to every one of these questions. And as soon as I say it, you will say, yes, of course.

Because the question itself implies the answer. Here we go. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? God.

Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand? God. Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? God. Who has established all the ends of the earth? God.

What is the person's name? The Lord. The last question is a little bit more difficult. And what is the name of the person's child? Well, if you're a Christian, you would say Jesus Christ.

If you're a Jew, you would say, that's strange. So, what I'm arguing here is that we are having a sequence of rhetorical questions. And they come quick fire.

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And because this is a prayer, a prayer being normally, even when it's not always explicit, a dialogue between a believer and their God, it is just possible that the speaker here is not Agur, but God answering, answering ironically, Agur, not with giving him answers, but with asking further questions. And as we reflect on this quick-fire sequence of questions, we are actually reminded of another sequence of quick fire questions in the biblical literature where God is doing exactly this kind of thing to another wise man who is in distress and close to death.

And that is Job. In chapters 38 to 42 of the book of Job, we have literally hundreds of questions. I kid you not, hundreds of questions, most of which are very similar.

Where were you when I created the earth and so on? And so, I am presenting the case here to say that these quick-fire questions that are coming here are God's responses to Agur telling him, you just confessed that you don't know about religious things and I concur. But what I do want you to know is that I, God, am in charge. I know what I am doing.

And so, what you need to do is you need to rely on me and on me alone and not on whatever knowledge or lack of knowledge you have. Don't be so self-centered and self-focused in your crisis or challenge that you are facing, but bring your concerns to me. That I think is the rhetorical interchange between God and Agur.

So Agur is trying to get God on his side and say, God, help me in this situation, and probably assuming that change the situation or help me to really understand how I can deal with this situation. And then God is responding to this and saying, you can't handle this. Let me handle it.

You need to focus on me, not on the situation. You don't need to focus, you should not focus, on your lack of knowledge or try to think that the way out of the situation is through me imparting more factual knowledge to you about the particular crisis you are facing. Rather, what God is saying to Agur is, rely on me and I will sort it out.

So that's kind of my interpretation. And again, there are other interpretations, but again, I think this is an imaginative interpretation that is in line with what we actually find here and seems to make sense overall of the individual statements and the larger perspective as well. What remains enigmatic, certainly at the time when this was written, is the question about whether the answer to all of this is God, then the last question, what is the person's name, from a Christian perspective, fits very nicely.

From an ancient Israelite perspective, it does not. So, in this interpretation, one of the problems and the one thing that probably I can't quite fit yet is, what is this question? I will attempt now to explain it, but I realize, even as I continue to work on this book of Proverbs, that I need to do a little bit more work before I can be more sure that this explanation holds water. And it's this, that the last statement, what is the name of the person's child, is again like the other questions that are rhetorical questions that imply the answer, God, God, God, God, God.

Here, it is also a rhetorical question, but it implies a different kind of answer. Rather than the answer, the name is Jesus, or the name is another minor God, or the son of some deity or something, rather the implied answer is, nobody knows, nobody can know, and it doesn't matter. So that's my take on this, but I know I need to do a bit more work on this.

This barrage of questions then ends with a statement, surely you know. So, here's now again someone addressing someone else, and I am arguing here that it is God addressing Agur. And this surely you know is exactly what God does with Job at the end of all these questions that are all rhetorical questions that are impossible for Job to answer, and at the end of all of it, when God has asked Job all these questions about how the universe was created, or how crocodiles and hippopotami should be tamed, and all these amazing questions, then God kind of rubs it in and says to Job, surely you know the answer, come on then.

And of course, it's utter sarcasm. And that's exactly, I think, what is happening here now. God is saying to Agur, surely you know, and of course you don't, and I know that, and you know that, and I know that you know that, and you know that I know that.

Now we are clear about what you're going to do. That is, I think, what is the interaction here in this dialogue? And what we can see here is this is not kind of a friendly, gentle counseling session between poor Agur and his gentle, loving God.

This is a serious confrontation between two grown-ups. A grown-up in heaven and a grown-up on earth who is getting his nose rubbed in the dust. At the end of this now, Agur continues.

And I'm going to read now the next two verses. Because they, I believe, are Agur's initial response to what he has just heard, the words from God that he has just heard. And this is what he says, in verse 5, Every word of God proves true.

He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Can you see what just happened? Agur, rather than being freaked out and panicking and running away from God because God has confronted him with all these questions, is directly responding, or so it appears, with faithful wisdom. He says Every word of God proves true.

In the context, if I'm right, and verse 4 is all questions, words from God to him, then what Agur is saying is, I get it. I get what you've just been saying to me. Every word you have said to me proves true.

I can see it now. And then he responds exactly as I have suggested. God wants him to respond.

Remember I said the impact of the questions is, don't focus so much on your own understanding or lack thereof, but focus on me. I will sort it out. And look what Agur says here.

Every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Boom.

Agur got it. He realizes that he needs to rely on his God in order to overcome whatever crisis he is facing. And then verse 6. Do not add to his words or else he will rebuke you and you will be found a liar.

And here we have a second reflection by Agur which has to do with divine revelation. It's quite similar in a way to the ending of the book of Ecclesiastes where a final editor who comments on the teachings of Ecclesiastes in the book is saying beyond these matters, do focus on these words of Ecclesiastes and not on other things because of the making of books there is no end and much study where is the body. We also have many other statements both in the Bible for example in Revelation that say do not take anything away or add anything to this revelation from God.

We have several statements in the same way in the book of Deuteronomy at the end of the revelation of the Torah. And even more than that we have many statements of similar impact in the religious writings from the ancient Near East outside of Israel. So religious texts are often accompanied by statements that do not add anything to it, don't take anything away from it, take it as it is and don't make it fit.

The question that arises here then is when we find at the end of this book a man who clearly has some wisdom who is in speaking terms with God, who is inspired in what he says, if that man is kind of stressing his ignorance, receiving divine revelation that is not about I give you more information or more knowledge or more wisdom but rather I help you to rely on me, God, rather than on your knowledge. And this man then says no words should be added to the word or words of God. Then it seems to me we are having a very important, how can I put it, complementary statement to everything else that is being said about wisdom in the book of Proverbs until now.

Until now from chapter 1 to chapter 29 it was all about young men and the book was addressed at that time exclusively or mostly to men. For the modern day of course, we want to say, young man, young woman. If you acquire more knowledge and wisdom, you will do well for yourself.

But at the end of, near the end of the book we have a model character expressing intellectual humility and faith saying I do not want to rely on myself but I rely on the word of God. Every word of God. And he says because nothing should be taken away, nothing added, only the word of God.

And so, what we may have here is a later phase in the development of the book of Proverbs where a very powerful but enigmatic reflection that was produced by Argo perhaps for another occasion has been added and included in this collection of collections in order to provide an even more mature reflection on the value of wisdom being augmented with divine revelation from God through God's word or words. And so, what is possible here is that we have a subtle integration of wisdom literature with the rest of the revealed word of God in scripture. Especially the Torah,

the five books of Moses, the word of God quintessentially but possibly also the prophets, the prophetic books of the biblical canon which is a fascinating thing to think about.

I did not talk about this earlier but chapter two for example talks a lot about the Torah, the teaching that the young man should acquire. And it is the very word Torah that is also used in ancient Israel for the five books of Moses. Most people have assumed for a long time that the Torah mentioned here is just a synonym, it's not a synonym or the designation for the Torah, the five books of Moses, but it's just a way to describe the teaching of the Father.

With hindsight from chapter 30 and also based on a number of other considerations a very good and strong case can be made that both in chapter two near the beginning of the book and here in chapter 30 near the end of the book reference, a veiled reference, indirect reference is being made to the other scriptures of Israel being also important. Remember early on in the lecture series we said it is striking how little of the other religious aspects of ancient Israel play a role in the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes as well in Job. Well here now we may have a slight corrective that suggests perhaps there are more of the other aspects of ancient Israel spirituality that we were missing that are actually still there in the background which would bring the so-called wisdom literature back closer again to a more holistic understanding of all of the writings of ancient Israel where the book is not nearly as secular or separated from the other religious writings and thinking of its age.

So, there we are. So, this is the initial response where Agur now reflects philosophically and theologically on the impact of what he has just learned through the questions he cannot answer. And then we come in verses 7 to 9 to a direct prayer again where Agur now directly addresses God again.

So, the prayerful reflection is continuing now with a direct, distinctive prayer sequence within the overall structure of this dialogue between God and Agur. And in verses 7 to 9 which I read in one go, he asks two things from God. God has just told him, you need to rely on me.

He's just said, yes, God is a shield to those who take refuge in him and now he's doing it. Now he's taking refuge in God. This is how he's doing it.

I believe that the way how he is doing this taking refuge in God may actually explain indirectly to us what kind of crisis Agur is facing. Remember earlier on we were talking about the fact, that is he near the end of his life and he's asking for healing or for inner strength or something? Or is this more about to do with whether he's in the fullness of life or early in life and he's facing a specific crisis? I think he's facing a specific crisis and I now will show why I think so. Two things I offer to you.

Do not deny them to me before I die now. Before I die, of course, again suggests that he's close to death. But I think, although it sounds like that, I would think, again, this is an exaggerated statement similar to the early ones.

He said, oh, I don't know nothing and he knew quite a lot actually. Here when he said, oh, before I die, he is exaggerating in order to kind of twist God's hand rhetorically in his prayer. I feel sorry for me, do something.

And then this is the first thing he asks, remove far from me falsehood and lying. And then the second thing he asks is, give me neither poverty nor riches. And then the third thing he asks, you know this is what's happening, feed me with the food that I need.

So, he says, I ask two things of you and then he asks three. I don't know why he does that. One way of explaining that would be to say that when he says, so the first thing clearly is different, remove far from me falsehood and lying.

And then presumably the second thing is kind of expressing the same thing twice or something similar. Namely, he says, give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me just with what I need, which is exactly neither poverty nor riches.

So, it is probably, although he is giving three appeals, the second and third appeals are actually asking for one and the same thing. So, he is asking for two things, although he is doing it three times. Now, even though I have just said that the two things are two different kinds of things, I think they are related.

The first thing Agur asks for is, to remove from me falsehood and lying. The falsehood and lying could either be other people lying to Agur and treating him falsely in some way, treacherously, or whatever. Or it could mean that Agur is asking God, to help me myself not to act wrongfully and deceitfully.

This then goes on to say, give me just enough of what I need, but not less than I need and not excessively more than I need. And then he explains why he is asking for that. And I think we need to read why he is asking for that in verse 9 in order to understand how the second request for sufficiency rather than excess or need is related to the first request about falsehood and lying.

Because he says, if I don't get this, if I have too little or too much, then he says, or I shall be full and deny you and say, who is the Lord? Or I shall be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. So what is he trying to say here? What he is saying is that if he has an excess of material possessions, he will fall back into the position of self-reliance and say, who is the Lord? Which, by the way, is also a rhetorical question. The answer being, the Lord is nothing.

I don't need God. I can do it on my own. Which is exactly, of course, the issue we were dealing with earlier on in his reflection.

So, he does not want to have a situation where he has so much material belongings that he will be tempted to neglect his relationship with God. And he will neglect relying on God but will rely on himself. And therefore, I believe, from a religious perspective, falls into falsehood and lying, lying in the sense of denying the importance of God in his life.

On the other hand, the other extreme, if he were poor, the temptation for him would not be pride, but the temptation would be to be so desperate that he would justify breaking the law, committing an immoral deed, and stealing. And thereby, he says, profane the name of my God. Either way are ways of self-reliance, by the way.

And, I believe, pride. And so I think what we have here then is Agur really responding to the lesson that he is learning here, that he is, of course, the whole reflection, of course, is his way of recording in a poetic form, in a poetic meditation, the process that he has gone through, probably not just in one prayer sequence in two minutes, as we read here, but maybe through a period of several days, weeks, months, or even years, where he was wrestling with the issues of pride and self-reliance and dealing with what he was facing. And I think, therefore, now I conclude kind of this opening section by saying that the crisis that he was facing was a religious crisis based on the potential of pride, perhaps the very kind of pride that could have arisen out of a self-oriented reading of the early chapters of the Book of Proverbs.

And he has realized in this reflection that what is most needed for the truly wise person is to rely on God and not on oneself, one's own wisdom and knowledge. This brings us to a nice break here in the text itself, and we will take a short break. This is Dr. Knut Heim and his teaching on the Book of Proverbs.

This is session number 17, Proverbs chapter 30, verses 1 through 9, Introduction to Agor.