

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 18

Proverbs 30:15-16 and 18-20

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This is Dr. Knut Heim in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 18, Proverbs chapter 30, verses 15 through 16 and 18 through 20.

Welcome to lecture 18 on the biblical book of Proverbs.

We have just looked in the previous lecture at the opening prayer sequence of Agur's chapter in chapter 29 of the book. In this quite short lecture now, I just want to look at two particular sequences of verses in the rest of Agur's reflection. We don't have time to look at all of these, but I want to highlight two things.

One is that, well actually no, just one thing, I want to highlight one thing with regard to two examples. Much of what I believe the various groups of verses in the rest of the chapter are trying to show is to do with either humility or modesty in line with the key learning that Agur has reflected in his prayer. The two sections I want to look at among many other very vivid, very lively, and fascinating kinds of evocative poetic sequences are verses 15 to 16.

This is a beautiful one. The leech is a blood-sucking kind of small animal. The leech has two daughters.

Give, give, they cry. Three things are never satisfied. Four never say enough.

Shale, the barren womb, the earth ever thirsty for water, and the fire that never says enough. So, very evocative, very vivid, fascinating language here. With biting sarcasm and irony, exploring the ridiculousness of selfish ambition in opposition to humble reliance on God.

I want, I want, I want. More, more, more. And then this sequence of what the writer sarcastically and humorously is describing as things that never have enough.

And, of course, all of them are metaphors ultimately for human beings and their insatiable greed. They never say enough. That's exactly the problem that, as I have argued in the last lecture, Agur himself had been wrestling with.

And God had brought him to a prayer where he said, help me to be satisfied with just enough and not even more than enough. He had prayed for the ability to say, yeah, that's enough. And here now this is exactly being addressed in a funny, humorous, sarcastic, provocative way that makes people think and want to joy Agur in his reliance on God.

That's the first one. The second one, I think, is even more funny. This is from verses 18 to 20.

And it starts with a sequence of things that Agur finds incomprehensible. Here they go. Three things are too wonderful for me.

Four 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 girl. And then the next verse says, this is the way of an adulteress.

She eats and wipes her mouth and says, I have done nothing wrong. Now what's going on here? It's actually absolutely crucial to understand the biting sarcasm of this to connect verse 20 with verses 18 to 19, which not everybody does. But the initially enigmatic statements, what is the way of an eagle in the sky, snake on a rock, ship on the sea, a man with a girl, what do they have in common that is so incomprehensible? Well, too wonderful to understand.

Well, there are various options, but my preferred one is this. And for the sake of brevity, I don't go into all the other ones. But what they all have in common, which makes it so difficult to understand, is when you see the eagle flying in the sky, it is a majestic thing to behold.

But once the eagle is gone, no trace is left of the eagle's path. The snake on a rock, formidable stealth. When she strikes, it's deadly.

But you don't see her until it's too late. And after she's gone, she has left no trace behind. That's what makes her so dangerous.

And then the ship on the high seas, again, when the ship initially plows its way through the waves, notice how I phrase that, you get the waves, I don't know what they are called professionally, but they are mighty often. Yet, two or three minutes later, nothing left. It is as if the ship had never been there.

The ocean shows no trace of what the ship has just done. Which brings us to the way of a man with a girl. Now, the way of a man with a girl is not a progression from place A to B but is typically, and this is what is being highlighted here, a progression from outside into inside and back out, you know what I'm talking about.

This is about sexual intercourse. And again, it's a sarcastic, funny, intriguing way of referring to the fact that after the sexual intercourse has happened, the two get dressed and nobody knows. And thus, of course, the girl gets pregnant, or the woman gets pregnant.

But in the situation of sexual temptation, it's easy to fall into it for the very fact that it is so tempting, it is so desirable, it is so attractive, and everything else. But also, one can easily be under the illusion that we won't be found out, nobody will know. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with sexual intercourse, but the understanding here of the way of a man with a girl is that this is some kind of illicit sexual intercourse, probably, and that's what I'm arguing in a moment, between a married woman and a man.

So, the girl here is a married woman, and this is what comes across in verse 20. This is the way of an adulteress. She eats.

What she eats here is, of course, again, a poetic expression for the sexual act. And then wipes her mouth. Again, once the mouth is wiped in the image of the things that are too wonderful to understand, one cannot see that she's just eaten.

And then she says, I have done no wrong. And the sequence of these verses is suggesting that if people do this sort of thing, by the way, one of the things that is being warned against constantly throughout the opening chapters of the Book of Proverbs, about marital fidelity. That's the reference to the strange woman.

The woman is not strange because she's a foreigner. The woman is strange because she's married to another man. And so what this sequence of Proverbs is talking about, I believe, is sexual modesty.

Even though you think no one will hold you accountable, do the right thing. If you want to have a fulfilled sex life, don't rely on your own way, falsehood, deceit, and lying, that Agur prayed God to help him from. But ask God for the right partner, for the right man, for the right woman in your life.

So, there we are. This brings us to the close of this short lecture. Thank you.

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