

Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 18

© 2024 August Konkell and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 18, Contemplation of Wisdom, Proverbs 30:1-17, Appendix.

Welcome to our meditations on the book of Proverbs.

In these talks, we have now come to the point in Proverbs that we often refer to as the Appendix. The major collections end with the Proverbs of the men of Hezekiah. Then after that, we have various shorter pieces that conclude the book.

The first of these shorter pieces is said to be the words of Agur, the son of Yahweh, in chapter 30, verse 1. There are things in Proverbs that are a bit mysterious, and we know one of them is this first verse in Proverbs 30. It's not altogether sure what the origin and meaning of the words Agur, son of Yahweh, really was. Usually, it's interpreted as being a king or a wise person, and these are his thoughts and his words.

But no such persons are otherwise known in any sense whatever. Some of the rabbis, going back to the medieval period and earlier, pondered these as possibly being just an ordinary noun. So Agur could be one who is a sojourner, or maybe a gatherer, and Yahweh could be someone who is pure.

So maybe these are just the thoughts of someone who gathers Proverbs together and is pure. Now, this next phrase is also one in which there are various translations. Sometimes this is translated as a name, Ucal, but it seems almost certain that this should be divided, this term, as a verb, in which it says, I am weary, I am weary.

These are two Hebrew words rather than one. The first Hebrew word is la, I am weary, and then the second one is Jekal, I am consumed. So, it's an expression of the weariness that humans may sometimes feel.

I am weary, oh God, Ithiel is the God part. I am weary, oh God, I am weary, and I have come to an end. Now, the misnomer, the word, Ithiel, in Hebrew history of this verse is actually somewhat deepened when we come to look at the book of Proverbs in the other version in which we have it.

And I've already mentioned that the other version in which we have Proverbs is preserved in the Greek translation. Now, what we have observed numerous times is that Proverbs grew over centuries, and so at some point, its form was considered to be final. But the form that was adopted as final in the Hebrew that was translated by the Greek was different from the form that came to be considered final in the

Hebrew text as it was preserved after the fall of Jerusalem and in the medieval period.

So, as I have noted here in this little explanation, the Greek text here is quite different, and what it says in chapter 30 verse 1 is, fear my words, son, and having feared them, repent. Now, that bears no relationship to the Hebrew that we have in our text, but it makes very good sense in the Greek text because there, there is a completely different antecedent. That is the chapters that come before.

So, in the Greek text, what we have is the words of the wise ending in 24:22. That whole section of the words of the wise is then followed immediately by these words in 31 to 9, the additional words for the wise, the numerical Proverbs. That whole section comes first, and then the book concludes with the collection of Hezekiah in 25:1. Quite a different arrangement.

And one is not more right than the other. They're just simply different, and that somewhat shows up in some of the mysteries that we have with our text. But this is the Oracle of Agur, as it's called, and essentially what he is doing is lamenting our ignorance.

Lamenting the fact that we do not know the ways of God. He says I was like an animal. I was like a beast.

I just didn't understand. A little bit of the lament of the preacher, you know, what is life really all about? How do we understand all of these times and everything that is going on? Well, we can't make sense of it with the knowledge that we have. We don't know why all of these things happen.

So how is it then that we must live? Well, that's the question that the preacher asks. And Proverbs, in some ways, is asking the same question as the preacher. Given that we don't understand all of these things, how then do we live? How do we conduct ourselves? Creation is a marvel of beauty and danger as we see it from the book of Job.

Eliphaz tries to say, you know, whatever, however bad the circumstances, God intervenes and he makes good things happen. He sends the rain and so forth. And Job gives him a retort in his speech.

He says, yeah. He says God does things all right. He sends earthquakes and he sends all other sorts of things that cause us pain and trouble.

God's ways don't always conform. And so, Job, of course, is the book about how do we know justice? What is justice all about? And the friends think they know what justice is. Job says, no, you're wrong.

That isn't how justice works in relation to pain. But then Job turns on God and he says, you're not just. God turns to Job at the end of the book in chapters 30 verses 8 to 14.

And he says, well, Job, why don't you tell me what justice is? And then Job actually comes to the point that we arrive at, I'm a child of the dust. What do I actually know about justice? Well, that's the lament of our Aguirre. He doesn't know.

But he does have this. There is revealed truth. God has made his word known.

This is where Moses ends in Deuteronomy chapter 30. Moses says, listen, this Torah, Torah Zot, as it is in the Hebrew, this Torah is revealed. You don't have to go up to the heavens to try and get it.

It is here. It is with you. It is truth.

And then Deuteronomy has an additional caution. Don't think you can add to this, that you know something that this doesn't. And so Aguirre has this prayer for humility.

And I really like this passage in Proverbs chapter 30. Don't let me be too rich. Don't let me be too pure, too poor.

Help me to understand my place. A little bit like Psalm 73. I was jealous of the wicked until I started to see the bigger picture.

And I realized, you know, those who become so powerful and so rich by means of greed and other hurtful methods are not to be envied because they suffer more than we do. And I keep reading examples of that where some of the most wealthy people in the world live the most miserable, miserable lives. And then I think to myself, my, am I lucky that I don't have that kind of money or that kind of power because what they have is not to be envied.

Now, I think a new section begins here. We've talked about those who are blessed. Here we talk about those who are not blessed.

And those who are not blessed of course are those who refuse to recognize the dignity of a slave. So, for example, to criticize a slave to his master or a servant to his master, not a slave in our contemporary sense of the word, do that, that's not going to prove to be good. The sins of a wicked generation, those who have contempt of parents, you know, that's such a serious thing within the Torah of Moses, the teaching of Moses, that it's worthy of death if in fact, it is that kind of contempt.

Self-righteousness, arrogance, and greed are like a wild beast. And what these people do of course is end up taking your property one way or another. All of these things are wrongs and these people, the writer of the wisdom says, are those people who are not blessed.

And then finally, this concluding word on greed with the leech. The leech has as it were two mouths. I don't understand too much about leeches, but they're greedy with the whole of their body.

And so, the daughters of the leech are like the leech herself. She sort of deserves them as it were. And they're always needing more.

And so, the wise writer here, wisdom writer here, gives us examples of things that never say enough. Greed never says enough, just like Sheol never says enough. No matter how many people die, it's not enough.

They will keep on dying. Fire never says enough. No matter how much is burned, it will still burn more.

Barrenness is a pain that simply can't be satisfied. It never says enough. This is something that as a pastor, I have always found the hardest thing to deal with.

It's one thing to deal with death. And I've dealt with the death of children, even of infants. But the pain of not being able to have a child when that's what you desire is just of a different order.

I cannot explain it. But I can tell you as a pastor that it's a different kind of thing to try to deal with. Disdain for parents.

Very often the way in which children show disdain for parents, and we see this sometimes in very awful cases, where children want their parents' money, where children want their parents' property. And you don't have to go very far to read about crimes where children kill parents because what they want is their property. This is compared to the greedy eye.

As Jesus explains it in Matthew, the greedy eye, beware of the greedy eye. It's a quotation that comes from Deuteronomy chapter 15 in relation to the sabbatical year. When the sabbatical year is coming up, be generous.

Don't say, oh, this debt is going to be forgiven in just a year's time, and so therefore I'm not going to loan this money. No, be careful about that kind of greed. Don't let your eye be greedy.

And here the proverb says, that greedy eye will get plucked out by the vulture that soars over the valley. This kind of greed is very destructive. I find these some of the most challenging and difficult of the Proverbs because it is so difficult to determine what I need as opposed to what I just want.

Part of that difficulty is that sometimes what I need actually keeps changing because the world around me changes and society around me changes, and I may need to drive a car. That may not be something that's an option. And yet at the same time, there are other things that I want, and to me, they're just as essential as anything else for my life.

And so, there is always a little bit of this tension. But these proverbs are a reminder that we constantly need to be careful that we are not being controlled by those things we want. Being reminded, as the words of Agur begin, there's so little that we know, and we really, as individuals, are so limited and so frail.

This is Dr. August Konkel in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 18, Contemplation of Wisdom. Proverbs 30:1-17, Appendix.