

Dr. August Konkel, Proverbs, Session 18, Contemplation on Wisdom, Proverbs 30:1-17 (Appendix), 6-min. Video Overview

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You know, tucked away in the book of Proverbs, there's this chapter. It's one of the most mysterious. It's the ancient wisdom of a man named Agur, who, get this, might not even have existed.

So, right off the bat, we've got a puzzle on our hands. The chapter is credited to Agur, son of Jacob. But who is that? I mean, this guy isn't mentioned anywhere else in the historical record, which immediately turns this whole thing into a fascinating piece of detective work.

Think of this chapter as kind of like an appendix to the main collection of Proverbs. And trying to figure out who this Agur guy is, well, it sends you down a real rabbit hole of ancient translation and interpretation. It's a journey that shows you just how fluid these ancient texts could be.

So, who was he? A king? Some wise man? Or maybe Agur isn't even a name at all. Some ancient rabbis actually thought Agur was more of a description, like one who gathers Proverbs, or maybe a pure sojourner. The mystery is really part of what gives the text its power.

Okay, and this is where the mystery really kicks into high gear. When we put the oldest Hebrew manuscript side by side with the ancient Greek translation, the very first verse says two completely different things. One is this raw cry of despair.

The other is a command to repent. I mean, how is that even possible? Now, the key here isn't to think that one version is right and the other is wrong. It's more that Proverbs grew over time, and it was finalized in different forms.

So, for what we're talking about today, we're going to stick with the Hebrew text, which begins not with some divine command, but with a raw, very human cry. And that cry of weariness really sets the stage for everything that comes next. It's this confession of hitting a wall, of realizing the profound limits of our own understanding.

You know, this is not the kind of confident statement you'd expect from a wise sage, right? It's a confession of just utter exhaustion. The speaker has tried to understand the world, to figure out God's ways, and he's just reached his limit. He's come to an end.

He even goes on to say he feels more like a beast than a person, that he just doesn't get it. And this really echoes the kind of laments we see in other great wisdom books, like Job and Ecclesiastes, where you have these speakers grappling with a world that often seems totally unjust and impossible to understand. So, all this exhaustion, this confusion, it leads Agard to maybe the most important question of all.

If we admit we can't know everything, if we accept our own limitations, then how are we supposed to live? How do we navigate a world we can't fully grasp? And what's fascinating is that Agard's answer isn't some complex philosophical argument. It's just a simple but really profound prayer. A prayer for humility, for moderation, for a life lived right in the balanced middle, away from the dangerous extremes.

And the logic here is just brilliant. He asks God to keep him from two extremes. First, poverty, not just because it's awful, but because he's worried that desperation could push him to steal and dishonor his God.

And second, riches, because, you know, having too much can breed this kind of arrogance that makes you forget you even need God in the first place. And wow, is this ancient prayer still relevant today or what? As scholar Dr. August Konkel points out, extreme wealth so often leads not to happiness but to misery. Agard's wisdom is this timeless reminder that what looks like a blessing can actually be a curse.

So, after laying out this path of wisdom, you know, humility and moderation, Agard totally flips the script. He turns to its dark opposite, the insatiable, destructive nature of human greed. He uses this really powerful and, let's be honest, kind of disgusting metaphor: a leech.

A creature that only knows how to take. He imagines it has two daughters who are just like their mother, constantly crying out, "Give, give." That's the voice of greed, right? It's never satisfied.

It always wants more. And just to really hammer this point home, he lists four other things in nature that are basically impossible to satisfy. The grave or shield is never full.

A barren womb aches with unfulfilled desire. Parched earth will always soak up more water. And a fire, well, a fire will burn as long as there is fuel.

Greed, he's saying, is just like these forces. It just doesn't have an off switch. But this ancient warning, it isn't just some abstract idea.

Agard connects this insatiable desire to very specific, destructive human behaviors that, frankly, are still totally recognizable today. See, this kind of greed isn't just about wanting more stuff. It shows up as arrogance, as this smug self-righteousness, and this is a big one: contempt for other people, especially your own parents, often because you want to get their property and inheritance.

And the proverb uses some shockingly graphic language to condemn this greedy eye. The image of vultures pecking out the eye that looks down on a parent- I mean, it's meant to be jarring. It shows just how destructive and unnatural this kind of greed was considered to be.

So all of this really brings us to the central tension in our own lives, doesn't it? Agur's wisdom basically forces us to look in the mirror and confront that line between what we genuinely need and what we just want- those desires that, like the leech, can become insatiable and end up controlling us. And let's be real, knowing the difference, that's the hard part. And that's exactly why Agard's starting point is so important.

The wisdom to tell need from want doesn't start with some spreadsheet. It starts with humility. It starts with that confession.

I am weary. I don't understand everything. So we're left with this question that Agur's words just leave echoing through the centuries.

It's a challenge to really look at our own lives, our ambitions, our anxieties, and ask ourselves that tough question. Is my life being guided by what I truly need, or is it being controlled by a want that will never ever say enough?