

1. Agur, a keen observer of life

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn again to Proverbs chapter 30, page 551. And as I said earlier, tonight we'll be looking at the first 17 verses of the chapter.

You'll probably feel that there is a slight air of mystery. About these last two chapters of Proverbs. And the main reason for that is that we know so little about their origin.

Chapter 30, as you see, contains the words of Agur, son of Jacke. But who was Agur? We don't really know. He wasn't my third cousin. And I don't suppose he was yours either.

He's a mystery figure. He's a voice from the past that no one can really place. Quite possibly not even Jewish. A wise man from the ancient Middle East somewhere.

Now the ancient Middle East was famed for its wise men. And in the ancient world there was a strong tradition of wise men and their wise words. All over that area and in lands much further afield than Israel.

[1 : 15] The writer of 1 Kings chapter 4 says this. And here he's placing Solomon and Solomon's wisdom in the context of this wider movement. He says, Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt.

For he was wiser than all other men. Wiser than Ethan the Ezraite and Haman, Chalcol and Dardot the sons of Mahal. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations.

So there the author of 1 Kings is quoting the names of a few well-known wise men. And he's saying that Solomon was wiser than all of them. So there was clearly a great tradition of these wise sages and their wise words.

There were many such men. And Agur, son of Jacke, was probably one of them. And if we ask why his words should be included in the Hebrew Bible, the answer is perhaps there before our eyes in verse 1.

The words of Agur, son of Jacke, the oracle. And that means the prophecy. Or if you like, the word of God. So whoever was the final editor of the book of Proverbs, whoever put together all these chapters, obviously recognised that these words of Agur carried the weight of divine authority.

[2 : 32] They're not just the words of any old pagan sage. In some wonderful way, they've been inspired by the one true God. And therefore, they are holy scripture.

Every bit as much inspired by God as the words of Moses or the apostles. So let's approach them with reverence. They're truly the words of God. And we should regard Agur as a true prophet of the Lord, who brings us an oracle, or if you like, a word from heaven.

Well, let's turn to the text. We'll look at, as I say, verses 1 to 17. And the overwhelming design and purpose of these verses is to humble the reader.

So friends, if you don't want to be humbled by the words of Agur, I guess the time to leave the building is now. Everyone's still here. That's good.

And I would take the passage in three sections. First of all, verses 1 to 6. And I want to give those verses the heading, Agur longs to know God. Let me read from halfway through verse 1 to the end of verse 3 again.

[3 : 38] Isn't that an extraordinary outburst?

I'm weary. I'm worn out. I'm stupid. I have no understanding, no wisdom, no knowledge of God. And we might want to say, Well, if that's true, brother, what right have you to speak to us in the name of God?

If you're such a wrung-out dumbo dunce, wouldn't we do better to read somebody else's words? But we'd be unwise to dismiss him as quickly as that.

Isn't he really saying to the reader, Don't you sometimes feel like this? Like I've just said. And we reply, Yes, if I'm honest, I do.

Quite often. Picture yourself coming home at the end of a long and particularly difficult and particularly frustrating day at work. Do you know the sort of picture?

[4 : 43] You stumble in through the front door, you drop your bag in the kitchen, you slump into a chair with a groan, and your sweet, attentive, competent wife brings you a cup of tea. And you say to her, Darling, I feel as if a bulldozer has knocked me flat today.

I'm scunnered with tiredness. You know, I sometimes feel in this job that I'm doing as if I've learned nothing. My colleagues are ready to tear up my new business plan completely. Archie McKillop in the finance department has been an absolute pain and he contradicts everything I suggest.

Do you know, darling, I've been in this job for 25 years and I feel as if I've learned nothing about how to work with other people. And I wish I knew the Lord better as well. Isn't that the sort of thing Agur is saying in verses 1, 2 and 3?

And isn't that the way all of us sometimes feel? I'm worn out, I'm as dim as a Belisha beacon and I feel as if I've hardly started in the Christian life. And then look at verse 4.

Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name? What is his son's name?

[5 : 51] Surely you know. In other words, who, what man, what woman has been up to heaven to gain wisdom from God? What man or woman has done the sort of things that God has done?

Creating wind and water and continents and islands. Tell me the name of such a person if you know it. Of course you can't. Nobody's done that sort of thing. God is almighty. But we human beings, we are as puny and pathetic as grasshoppers.

So verse 4 is really a teasing out of the second half of verse 3. We don't naturally know God. We haven't seen things from God's wonderful lofty vantage point.

We haven't his power. So verses 1 to 4 are the very opposite of what a self-assured, confident human being would say.

These are the words of a man who knows what he's made of. He recognizes what a frail and lowly worm he is. He's looking into the mirror here in verses 1 to 4 and he's seeing himself truly.

[6 : 56] And as verse 2 puts it, he realizes that he is a shadow of what humanity ought to be. In verse 2 he is saying, I'm not a proper Adam.

I'm not even a man. My mind, my capacity is lower than that of a real human being. Now this is such a humbling message because Agur is inviting us to step into his shoes and to see ourselves as he sees himself, as weary, ignorant and stupid.

Now if you're sitting there somewhere in the gallery flexing your intellectual muscles and saying to yourself, this isn't quite me, I'm really a rather fine specimen of humanity myself, it may be that the Lord will have to take hold of your life and reduce you until eventually you too will say, I'm weary, oh God, I'm worn out, I'm too stupid even to be a human being.

Now don't you find this level of honesty so refreshing and it's so different from the way of the world? Just think of the way of the world for a moment.

Imagine you're a young man, youngish man, going for a job interview and there you are sitting in front of this interviewing panel of two or three rather fearsome looking people and somebody on the panel says to you, now tell us Mr. Smith, what qualities would you bring to our operation?

[8 : 19] and you reply like this, now just look at verse 2 as I give you the reply of Mr. Smith. You say, I'm energetic, I've always been like that, I'm full of get up and go, I think I would bring intelligence and vision to your work here.

I have a better than average brain, though I say it myself, and I would bring the wisdom of experience to bear upon this firm's plans and hopes. I think you'd find me a breath of fresh air in this company. Would you want to spend an afternoon in the company of a man like that?

I think I'd much prefer to take tea and crumpets with Agur, personally. But Agur is not a man who desponds about himself.

Yes, he recognizes his frailty and the limitations of his brain and how little he knows the Lord, but he knows where to turn. Doesn't he answer his own problem in verse 5?

Every word of God proves true. He's a shield to those who take refuge in him. Yes, Agur is small and frail, but it's the true words of God that will strengthen him and his understanding.

[9 : 32] And as the second half of verse 5 puts it, it's the presence of God that will shield him, protect him, when he's weary and worn and being attacked at his weak points. it's the words of God that will lead him to the true knowledge of God.

So therefore, verse 5 answers verse 3. And verse 6 shows us just how clearly he sees that the words of God are all the wisdom he needs.

Don't add to his words, he says in verse 6. If you do, your additions will only be lies and the Lord will rebuke you for misrepresenting him. So there's something very healthy and health-giving about Agur's words in verses 1 to 6.

He has a true, honest opinion of his own puny strength and his natural lack of the knowledge of God. But he knows where to turn. He knows that the words of God, which of course for us are the whole Bible, he knows that they will teach him to know God truly.

So let's be like Agur, acknowledging our weakness but knowing where to turn so as to learn the truth about God. We're now second.

[10 : 46] Agur craves to grow more godly. He craves to grow more godly and we'll look here at verses 7, 8 and 9. In verse 7, Agur is speaking to the Lord and there's something very earthy, very commonplace, human about what he asks of the Lord.

Look at verse 7. Two things I ask of you, deny them not to me before I die. Before I die. Now what does that phrase mean?

Doesn't it mean that there are two things that I really, really want? You hear this kind of conversation sometimes on the radio, don't you? Somebody's being interviewed and the interviewer says, now tell us, Mr. Fizakali, what do you really want to do before you die?

before you die. It's the big thing you want. And he says, I really want to climb the 286 Munroes of Scotland before I die. Or, tell us, Mr. Murray, what would you really like to do before you die?

I'd like to win Wimbledon at least once. So the thing a person wants to do before they die, that's their life's biggest ambition. So here is Agur speaking to the Lord, don't deny me these two things before I die.

[12 : 05] There's nothing I want more than these two things, Lord. So, what are these two infinitely desirable things? They're not physical achievements like Munro bagging or winning a tennis tournament.

They're both to do with growing in godliness. Agur is longing to be more godly than he currently is. So what are these two things?

They're both there in verse 8. The first is that he wants to become a more honest and truthful man. He says, remove from me, from my personality, from my heart, remove from me falsehood and lying.

And the second thing is, and he says this because he knows his moral weakness, he asks that he should be neither rich nor poor. So let's look at each of these items.

falsehood and lying. Please remove them far from me. Now the man could only speak like that if he knew that he was weak in those areas.

[13 : 10] But clearly Agur here is looking back on his life and he sees that there have been a number of times, perhaps even many times, when he is told lies. When he's deliberately given people an enhanced impression of the kind of man that he is.

Now what is it that makes people tell lies? There are perhaps two main common motives for lying. There are others, but perhaps the two main ones are these. First, it's to do with money.

We're on the make financially. We want to get hold of more money than we're entitled to. So we tell lies about our financial position to the inland revenue, or our employers, or our landlords, or our bank managers, or some other person who has something to do with our money.

But then secondly, we want to make ourselves appear to be better people, better in some way than we actually are. So we spin various falsehoods about our achievements, or about our abilities.

Or we perhaps deny that we have done wrong things when, in fact, we have done them, but it's because we want people to think better of us than we deserve. Now it all starts off very early in life, doesn't it?

[14 : 22] Just think of a young mother in her kitchen at home with two very young children. One of these very young children is eight months old and is sitting there strapped in the high chair, can't move, strapped in.

The other one is a three-year-old toddler, very much on the move. The mother has to go out of the room for a moment, she comes back in and she finds jam spread all over the table and halfway up the wall as well.

And she says to the three-year-old, Richard, what have you done, you naughty boy? And Richard points to his little sister, who's very securely strapped into the high chair and he says, it wasn't me, it was Kirstie.

Now as we get older we get a little bit more subtle and clever, don't we? We learn how to keep our falsehoods more covered up and harder to detect. But the problem is we want to make ourselves look better and nicer and more competent than we really are.

I went to theological college at the age of 22 to prepare for Christian ministry. And in my very first term I had to sit an exam. It wasn't a big public examination, it was one of these small internal college exams.

[15 : 37] And the exam was not to be invigilated, we weren't going to be sitting there all together in a big room with an invigilator. So we were given our exam paper, I think after breakfast by the tutor, and we were told to take it away to our own rooms and to finish it by half past twelve, or some such time.

And the tutor said to us, you must write your essay answers out of your heads. I don't want you to be opening your Bibles and looking up verses. I, however, wanted to give a good impression of my Bible knowledge.

So as I was writing my answers to the paper, despite what the tutor had said, once or twice I did very quickly, briefly open my Bible and just check up on one or two words and shut it again very quickly as though I perhaps hadn't even done it at all.

Anyway, I handed him my paper. A few days passed and my conscience smote me. So I went to my tutor, he was a nice fellow called Arthur Moore, and I confessed to him my dishonesty.

So he looked at me shrewdly and yet kindly and he said to me, well thank you Edward so much for telling me. Let it be water under the bridge. But he said, there is a lesson to be learned, isn't there?

[16 : 05] Now many years have passed since that incident took place. Have I learned that lesson? Is my heart today completely free of falsehood and lying?

I would be a fool to claim that it was. Almost certainly Agur was not a young man when he wrote these words. He'd been a God-fearing believer, probably for many years, and yet he knew the shadows that still lurked in his heart.

And so keen was he to honour the Lord in his behaviour that he begged him, before I die, clear this corruption out of my heart, this deep-seated tendency to be untruthful.

Now isn't that a great example of hungering and thirsting to live a godly life? Now let's think about this second before I die request.

Verse 8, Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food that is needful for me. Give us this day our daily bread is almost what he's saying there. Now let me ask this question, especially I want to ask it of the young adults here, people aged perhaps teenagers to 30 or something like that.

[18 : 05] Is your heart, is your heart really and truly set on making substantial sums of money during the course of your working life?

If it is, you need to listen to our friend Agua because he has carefully observed the weaknesses of his own heart. He says here to the Lord, please don't give me riches.

Why not? Verse 9, Lest I be full and deny you and say, who is the Lord? Now of course it is possible for some people to be Christian and wealthy and generous and godly.

We've all met people like that and they can be a great blessing. But Agua is showing us how dangerous it is to become wealthy. The danger is put so clearly there in verse 9.

I become full, I pat my tummy, I look at my monthly bank statement with a sense of pride and achievement and then I begin to deny the Lord.

[19 : 16] I say, who is he? I don't really need him now, I'm provided for. In fact, I've got so much that even if in the future pensions become past history when I'm an old man, I'll still be able to live comfortably and take luxury holidays twice a year.

This can happen to people who early in life seem to be such keen Christians. But by the time they're older, they've gradually transferred their trust from the Lord to their money.

No longer is the Lord their security, their provider and their delight. Money has taken his place. They may still pay lip service to the Lord, they may still come to church, but they deny the Lord because money is now their real security.

But also, you see that Agua prays not to become a pauper, a poor man. Why? Well, verse 9 again, lest I be poor and steal and thus profane, in other words bring his name into disrepute, profane the name of the Lord, my God.

So, Mr. Richardson, says the magistrate, this court finds you guilty of breaking into your neighbour's house and stealing 200 pounds. Would you like to tell the court why you've acted like this?

[20 : 41] Well, sir, I've had so little money for such a long time. You know, I've been out of work for a year or two. I've been eating very poorly. I just wanted a few decent meals.

And they say, Mr. Richardson, that you're a Christian and a member of St. James' Church. Is that so? Yes, sir, it is.

Let's look lastly at verses 10 to 17, where Agur, here's my title for these verses, Agur notices how fierce human beings can be.

And in these verses, Agur is expressing a number of fierce attitudes that we humans can express towards other people. And really the purpose of these verses is to open our eyes to what we're capable of.

Agur is observing human behavior very carefully. But his challenge is, are you willing not to behave like this? Are you willing to look at my examples of fierce behavior?

[21 : 53] And then to say, that is not for me. Let's look first at verse 10. Do not slander a servant to his master, lest he curse you and you be held guilty.

Agur has noticed people, people who've got privilege and power and position. He's noticed some of them blackening the names of more lowly people, blackening their names to their own superiors.

For example, Hugo, that secretary of yours, where on earth did you dig her up? I wouldn't employ her if I were paid to, slovenly woman.

Terrible sense of dress as well, hasn't she? Agur is saying to us, turn your back on that way of talking. Don't take advantage of less privileged people by speaking badly of them.

There's a fierceness and a nastiness about that kind of talk. Next, let's take verse 11. Observation. There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers.

[22 : 59] Now, at one level, Agur is simply observing a fact, but he means it to convey something forceful to the reader. Agur probably knew Exodus chapter 21 verse 17, which says, whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

And Agur perhaps expects his reader to know that verse from Exodus as well. So when he observes, almost mildly, that there are people around who curse their fathers, he's reminding his readers that such behaviour actually requires the death penalty under the law of Moses.

But now look on to verse 17. The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.

That is a rather less gentle verse than verse 11. But underlying both verse 11 and verse 17 are the fifth commandment. Honor your father and mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

So one of the features of a stable and happy and enduring society is that children when they're young learn to honour and obey their parents.

[24 : 14] And then when that generation have grown up and have become adult, they then still honour and look after and cherish their ageing parents when the parents grow old. Agur's verse 11 and verse 17 are really both verses that are unfolding the implications of the fifth commandment.

And Christians in the 21st century, we need to think very carefully about the way we think about our parents. Do you know, we can even curse and dishonour our parents after they've been long dead.

Don't you think there's something very godly, for example, about a Christian who says, to be honest, my father was not a good man, he was a drunkard, he was an abusive husband and he wasn't a good father.

But as I look back over all these years, I've learned to forgive him and to honour him in my heart, despite those very painful memories. Now verse 12, another observation by the sharp-eyed and clear-sighted Agur.

There are those who are clean in their own eyes, but are not washed of their filth. Filth, that's a very strong word, isn't it?

[25 : 31] We live in the country. I guess filth of a kind is what the farmers spray on the fields behind our house two or three times a year. We've discovered, my wife and I, that we don't hang out our washing on muck spreading day.

It's not good for the flavour of it when you put on the shirt the next day. Now verse 12 here describes an astonishing fact. It is an astonishing fact that it's possible for a person to look at his life and say, how clean and fresh I am.

I couldn't be cleaner if I'd just been washed in Persil. And yet in God's sight, that man is filthy, as if the muck spreader had just been passed him at two yards distance and had sprayed him from head to foot full bore.

Is it possible that a human being could so deceive himself about his character? Yes it is, says Agur, the clear-sighted.

Now let's take verses 13 and 14 together. Eyes and teeth. Verse 13, eyes. There are those, how lofty are their eyes, how high their eyelids lift.

[26 : 42] Now friends, just to demonstrate this, we have a little bit of a physical practice of this. I'd like you to open your eyes physically to their maximum possibility. Okay, it's a bit difficult isn't it? Especially if your eyes are half closed at the moment.

But just see if you can open your eyes to their full physical, that's it, big eyes, big eyes. Okay, now, having your eyes nicely open, tilt your head back a little bit until you can look down your nose.

It's quite a difficult thing. You can just see a bit of a vague pink blob there, can't you? Okay, and now, with your eyes full open, looking down your nose, just turn your head and look at the person sitting next to you.

Are you doing that? Aren't you feeling wonderfully superior? Yeah. Okay. Now, verse 14.

Teeth. There are those whose teeth are swords, whose fangs are knives to devour the poor from off the earth, the needy from among mankind.

[27 : 45] So the teeth of line one become the fangs of line two. Agur is saying, I have noticed people who are like leopards and hyenas. They slash and rip and devour.

They're merciless. And what is their prey? The poor and the needy. Agur is reminding us that in human society, the poor and the needy are not merely oppressed and pushed down by rich and powerful people.

They are killed by them, devoured. Their lives, we know this, don't we, their lives are often brought to a premature end by the greed and fierceness of powerful people.

We can't just look at the world's dictators and point the finger at them. We need to look in the mirror as our own eye teeth and ask if they might be growing long and turning into fangs.

The law of Moses is very strong on the importance of looking after the poor and treating them with both justice and mercy. But Agur is reminding us that it very often doesn't happen.

[28 : 51] Well, let's look now at a final fierceness in verses 15 and 16. Now, these verses, certainly verse 15, appears to be about the leech.

But actually, these verses are about people. Think of the leech. My father, actually, when he was a little boy, had a pet leech and he kept it in a small fish tank in the dining room at home in London where he lived.

I don't think his mother was too happy about it, but the leech used to crawl out of its tank every night. You know how a leech moves? Like, you know leeches? And it crawled out of its tank and it used to go across the dining room floor and he'd have to search all over the dining room every morning and he'd find it a little shriveled up dry ball of a thing in the corner.

He'd pop it back in its tank and it came back to life again. Now, the leech, if you're not familiar, you perhaps haven't kept a leech as a pet, but it's a small water creature. I don't know whether it's an insect, an amphibian, or a...

I don't know what it is. A nematode. But whatever it is, it's a small water creature, dark brown, perhaps blackish, with a sucker at its mouth. Leeches are found in many parts of the world.

[30 : 00] I've certainly seen them in England. They live in rivers and ponds, probably in Scotland as well. Do we live in Scotland? Norrie? Leeches? I don't know. Not in the highlands, I shouldn't think.

Everything flows too quickly up there. But the point about leeches is that when the cattle and the horses come down to the water to drink and they put their legs in the water, out comes the leech, latches onto the animal and starts to suck its blood.

Now, when you and I have had a good dinner, we're full. We've had enough, haven't we? But the leech is never full. He never picks up his napkin and wipes his mouth and burps and steps down from the table.

He always wants more. If that old horse will only stand in the water all night long, the leech will stay there and suck him dry. Now, look at verse 15.

The leech, says Agur, has two daughters. And what do they cry? This is their nature. Give! Give! Give me more! I'm not satisfied. Give me your lifeblood. I'm thirsty.

[31 : 04] Now, of course, Agur is noticing a human characteristic. This is not really a lesson in natural history. And to develop his picture a little further, he shows us four more insatiable things.

Four things which, like the leech, are never satisfied. Sheol, the place of the dead. There's always room for more there, isn't there? The barren womb. That's a painful one.

Do you remember Rachel in the book of Genesis when she'd been married to Jacob for some years and she couldn't bear children? She cried to Jacob, her husband, Give me children or I shall die.

Then there's the land. Thirsty land in the Middle East. Not talking about Dumbartonshire there. But thirsty land always wanting to drink in more water. And then fire, which of course will always willingly consume more fuel.

So what is Agur saying with this brain teaser? He is picking out one of the most unattractive creatures in the world.

[32 : 03] A creature that makes you shudder. It's repulsive. The leech. And he is saying to us, don't be like the leech. Never satisfied. Always craving more. Learn to be content with what you have.

That's what verse 15 is teaching. Contentment. Learn to be content with what you have. Content with your position in life. With your friends. With your income. With your church.

With the place where you live. With the shape of your nose. Don't be the kind of person who's always wanting something more. Christians can become like this.

I remember in one of the parishes down in England where I was minister. There was a little group of three or four people who always wanted something different. Something more. They were never satisfied.

They used to come to me week after week. Not just me but other people in the church as well. Dissatisfied about the music. About the preaching. About the young people's work. The old people's work. The taste of the tea and biscuits.

[33 : 01] Nothing was good enough for them. They almost drove me into an early grave. They had an inbuilt refusal in them to be content with what God had given them. And they were very miserable, unhappy people.

So this verse 15 is about learning contentment. The malcontent is fiercely demanding and threatens to suck the blood out of his neighbours and perhaps his fellow Christians as well.

Well, a final thought as we finish. The Old Testament prophets, the writing prophets, that's all the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi at the end of the Old Testament.

What they do in effect is to take the law of Moses and to expound it afresh to their own generation centuries after Moses. So the prophets bear witness to the law.

But so do the Proverbs. In our passage tonight, hasn't Agur been taking us as it were into the hinterland of the Ten Commandments?

[34 : 04] We've touched here on honour your father and mother and thou shalt not steal. Even these verses about the leech are a surprising exploration of the Tenth Commandment.

Thou shalt not covet. Give me more. I want more. The Proverbs come at us from such unexpected angles. That's why they're so delightful. But like Moses, these Proverbs teach us to know the Lord and to live his way.

That's their purpose. Well, next week in this second half of chapter 30, we've got eagles, snakes, ants, rock badgers, locusts, lions, lizards, cocks.

But Agur is not primarily going to be teaching us natural history. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. dear God, our Father, we do ask you to help us to be like this man.

We know nothing about him except these words and they tell us so much about him. And we ask that you will give to us more and more the same kind of desire, strong desire to live a holy life and to help others to do the same.

[35 : 32] We pray that you'll protect us from the dangers that he outlines here and that you will help our lives to become more and more sweet and clean and as you would wish them to be so that we can bear witness truly to the world, bear witness to Christ and his transforming power and we ask these things in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Amen.