

SLIDE 1. Life Hacks. Part 5

A Study of the Book of Proverbs

Sunday July 30, 2023

OPEN: *What did SLC hear this week?* Some mid-week warm-up reflections...

"The proverbs seem to be an overwhelming list of instructions in wisdom... Rather than hacks and lists (though), I find that the proverbs are a description of what it looks like when Wisdom is in control (or the opposite when it is not). I have begun to read all of Scripture in that light. A picture of what it looks like when God is in control - in my life." (Rudy Dyck)

"It all begins with the heart (Prov 4:23): The physical heart is the operations centre where our lives rest on. Without it, our body ceases to function. Spiritually, the heart is the place where our thoughts, words and actions originate. We need to "guard our hearts" and protect it from the negative things that Proverbs talks about, that can hinder our relationship with God and becoming the people God wants us to be. The condition of our spiritual heart will determine the choices we make. Do we live God's ways or the ways of the world." (Karen Stehr)

We are at the end of our short study of the BOOK OF PROVERBS. 31 chaps. in 31 days.

SLIDE 2. During our reading together – we've been reminded of a great many things. That...

- a. Wisdom begins with knowing God.
- b. We can learn from our critics.
- c. We should pause and pray and parse what we'd say.
- d. Friends love at all times, fools get drunk, and the wise control their anger.

We talked about God as the transcendent source of wisdom.

We talked about what life looks like when wisdom is in control and what life looks like when folly is in control. Good and bad respectively.

Then we skipped through a bunch of sayings of Solomon – from chps. 10-29 – to prove the contrast.

All of which has led us here – to chp. 30 - to the humble and hopeful wisdom of a wise teacher of his time, named Agur – who we know nothing about apart from his mention here – and whose writings here - are a little bit puzzling.

As one commentator puts it: "Prov. 30 is one of the most puzzling passages in Scripture. Not because we find its truths hard to accept, or its statements bottomless and profound, or its portrait of God unsettling or offensive. No, Prov. 30 is just plain weird. It offers enigmatic claims, non sequiturs, and material that has no obvious theological or ethical application for our lives" (TGC, Alex Kirk, April 12, 2021).

Agur is talking to his friends, Ithiel and Ucal...

He begins... *I am the most ignorant of men; I do not have a man's understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollows of his hands? Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and the name of his Son? Tell me if you know (vv. 2-4).*

Tell me if you know, Ithiel, Ucal.

Tell me if you know, South Langley Church.

There is humility here – “I am ignorant. I am a simple man. I have not been taught in schools of wisdom. I don't have my master's in theology.”

Though he might be using hyperbole to describe himself – he would be in good company in doing so.

David said, “I was like a beast before you” (Ps. 73:22).

And Job spoke of “man, who is a worm” (Job 25:6). A worm – then – himself.

Agur then gives evidence of his ignorance with a series of rhetorical questions – which sound an awful lot like the kinds of questions God asked Job in Job 38-41.

SLIDE 3. Humility gives way to wonder.

Agur invites us to look again at our world with the eye of a person of faith – with the eye of an artist and an observer of character.

SLIDE 4. To worship - like the Psalmist who said: *I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done* (Ps. 143:5).

What *about* this planet?

What does it tell us about the character of its Creator?

Tyler Staton – in his beautiful book, *Searching for Enough* – expresses this wonder...

“This planet comes equipped with the bare materials that have become shelter, transportation, and nourishment to sustain life. That can be said of no other planet that has been discovered in recorded history.

But the potential of this planet is not limited to the bare essentials. Our world also contains beauty. It's not just that our world can sustain us; it's that it dazzles us. We have sounds like rain falling and birds chirping, but we also have the raw materials formed into instruments that channel sound into music, giving us Handel's *Messiah* and Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* and Bob Dylan's *Hurricane*.

We have color, but it's not only the primaries. We find every imaginable shade that is rearranged in Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and Bushwick's graffiti murals.

We have nourishment, but it's not just rations to keep us alive; it's herbs and spices and flavor that combine to make tikka marsala and pad Thai and gumbo.

Culture, in all of its variety and expression, with all of its flavors and sounds and movement, was born out of the once untapped potential of this planet.

For a ball of dust floating around a star, that's pretty good"
(*Searching for Enough*, pp. 19-20).

A ball of dust that tells us its Creator cares about *sustaining* AND *delighting* His creatures.

Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Who has gathered up the wind in the hollows of his hands? Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? (v. 4).

Agur invites his friends – then – and us – now - to understand our limitations in understanding God and His creation.

A 3.5 lb brain trying to fathom the limitless.

So then - the wise and humble answer to each of these questions is – *God, not man.*

What is his name, and the name of his Son? Tell me if you know (v. 4).

Which might or might not have been a rhetorical question for Agur – who was born roughly 1000 years before the birth of Jesus.

Most scholars think - then – that this is prescient - because most scholars agree that Agur is referring to the Son – here - as - the Son of God (who is Jesus) – who would go up and down from heaven – who did – before the foundation of the earth – participate in the *creation* of the earth (Col. 1:16-17).

We are all somewhat ignorant, lack understanding, come up short on wisdom, and have but a whiff of a smidgeon of a shadow of a glimpse of the Holy One.

And because this is so – as it was for Agur – we ought to cling to God's word.

Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar (vv. 5-6).

Cling to God's word.

And pray.

Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God (vv. 7-9).

SLIDE 5. O.K. Heart-check time: What do you ask God for when you pray?

These verses form a beautifully balanced, honest, and practical prayer.

First – Agur asks God to keep him from falsehood – in contrast *to* God’s word (v. 5) – in contrast to keeping the truth.

It’s not hard to imagine that he is asking God to keep him from self-deception, from being deceived by others, and from leading *others* to believe things that aren’t true.

A wise person – we might say in this course of study – seeks to only know the truth of God’s word in every day – (red) read, remembered, and paraphrased – without a desire to water it down, to be selective in its application, or to ignore it because it is hard to understand.

To borrow from Jesus – we might say: the wise person *does not live on bread alone – but on every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Mt. 4:4).

So – the wise person prays to be kept as far away as possible from falsehood and lies.

Second – Agur asks for moderate wealth - that God would keep him from the extremes of poverty *and* luxury – because both pose their own temptations.

The temptation to go to desperate and sinful measures to have enough – or to get more - when one is poor. The temptation to forget about God and that it is he who gives the ability to produce wealth – when one is rich (Deut. 8:10-20).

Neither of which honors the Lord.

Agur is no dumb-dumb: he asks only for his daily bread. This is all he needs.

This – honors the Lord.

I am struck by this prayer: how lean and how simple it is – like the man who prayed it.

It has made me wonder about what I ask God for when I pray.

Maybe I’ll pray it today: Keep me from lies and lying, Lord, and keep me from luxury and poverty! Just give me what I need.

Agur then goes on – in vv. 10-14 - to denounce various sins which - do *not* honor the Lord – such as slandering and cursing and rebellion (vv. 10-11), arrogance (vv. 12-13), and abuse of the weak (v. 14).

SLIDE 6. The final section of Agur's lessons (vv. 15-34) frequently includes the use of a technique often seen in the Scriptures (Prov. 6:16; 30:15, 18, 21, 24, 29; Job 5:19; Amos 1:3) – involving naming a number - plus one – to indicate that the list or message is not complete.

As if to say that If I wanted to tell you about what really drives me crazy in the world of restaurants – using this technique - I'd say something like, "There are 2 things that really drive me crazy, 3 that send me over the edge: too much bun for my burger (so there is often bun shrapnel on my post-meal plate), paper straws that disintegrate into nothingness half-way through my beverage (don't even get me started about how they've spoiled drinking milkshakes – and there is such a thing as biodegradable plastic!), and asking me if I'd be o.k. with Pepsi when I've asked for a Diet Coke (like they're the same thing!).

I could go on. In other words – the list is not complete.

But that is a rant, not a lesson – even if it makes the point.

Agur offers a number of # naming + 1 observations between vv. 15 and 31.

Which is where it gets a little weird – and hard to make connections.

3 things that are never satisfied, 4 that never say "enough": leeches, the grave, a barren womb, and land – which never has enough water and too much fire.

3 things that are too amazing, 4 too hard to understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the seas, and the way of a man with a maiden (who eats and wipes her mouth and says, "I've done nothing wrong").

3 things that are unbearable and a 4th – a servant who becomes a king, a fool full of food, an unloved married woman, and a mistress displaced by her maidservant.

4 small but wise things (no + 1 here): ants that store food, badgers that make their homes in crags, locusts who march in ranks without a leader, and lizards who live with kings.

3 things that have a stately stride, 4 that move with a stately bearing: a lion who retreats before nothing, a strutting rooster, a he-goat, and a king and his army.

Altogether – we see that Agur is observing the world with interest – as he did at the start of his lesson.

The animal world acting – then - as a mirror for human behavior.

SLIDE 7. Do we live satisfied lives? Is enough – enough? Or is there a little too much – "Give me! Give me!" in our vocabulary? Or worse - do we act like leeches from time-to-time? (vv. 15-16).

I'll ask and answer for me: Am I O.K. with too much bun? Will I survive with paper straws? Can I say, "Pepsi is fine!?"

No! It's Pepsi! Kidding! Not kidding!

What's the secret to being satisfied? Paul tells us: in need or having plenty, well fed or hungry, living in plenty or in want – he says: *I can do everything through him who gives me strength* (Phil. 4:13).

Paul says - we can live contented lives through our relationship with Jesus Christ!
I would say – there's no other way!

SLIDE 8. Q. Riddle for you – from these verses (18-20): What are 3 things that move without a trace?

A. The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, and the way of a ship on the seas.

The contrasting figure/idea - here in this # naming + 1 group is the maiden – who is also described as an adulteress (v. 20).

Most commentators agree (and I think) that Agur is making a point here by contrast - which is this: that as impossible as it is to trace the movements of the eagle and the snake and the ship – it is just as impossible to *cover* the movements of an adulterer – keeping its destructive path from self and others.

Fools think otherwise. The wise keep to sexual purity.

Agur then lists 4 things (vv. 21-23) that shake the foundations of social order – things that are – in his opinion - fundamentally not right: when a malevolent servant becomes an abusive ruler, when fools are full, so they don't work, when a hateful person is married – how does that happen and at what cost to kids and partner? and when a maid steals the role of the wife she serves.

I think we can agree – not good! Right?!

The stuff of fools. Stay clear.

Now to another # naming (without a +1) group - that might be a little easier for us to understand and to apply (vv. 24-28). Ants can teach us about preparation, badgers about wise building, locusts about cooperation and order, and lizards about fearlessness.

All these creatures are small and unlearned. And yet – Agur says - they are extremely wise – which is to say – they cope and succeed despite their diminutive stature – which is to say - size or station doesn't determine wisdom.

Overcoming limitations does.

Now to the last of the # naming + 1 groups: stately beasts – a lion, a rooster, a ram, and a king at the head of a loyal army.

All of which are examples of confident and collected leaders.

All of which move forward, are first in line, initiate and absorb contact, are the first ones into the fray.

Because they are leaders.

Agur is a humble and simple man. His humility leads him to wonder. He clings to the word of God and offers honest and practical prayers. He sees the animal world as a mirror to his behavior – and so he sees lessons to learn and to teach – both from negative and positive examples.

He tells his friends, Ithiel and Uca: Be satisfied. Stay pure. Stay clear of what is fundamentally not right. Overcome limits. Lead when you can.

SLIDE 9. He reinforces these notions at the end: *If you have played the fool and exalted yourself, or if you have planned evil, clap your hand over your mouth...*

In other words - if you have been deceptive or plan to be – take immediate action – close your mouth – to keep yourself from acting like a fool.

Because – like it or not – intended or not – there are negative consequences.

For as churning the milk produces butter and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife (vv. 32-33).