

# Sermon 97, Ignorance Solved by the Word and Prayer, Proverbs 30:1-9

**Proposition:** Agur's weariness in the search for truth was solved when he discovered the pure words of God and responded in prayer for God's provision.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are speeding apace toward the end of the book of Proverbs. We have already seen over and over the sages' insistence that knowledge is relational, personal, and invested. There is no disinterested knowledge, for knowledge begins with the fear of the LORD. If you don't fear Him, then you know nothing as you ought to know. You are, in fact, a fool. But as we look at this text this evening, we will see even more clearly the relational dimension of wisdom and understanding. The testimony of Agur speaks to the reality that deep ignorance, weariness in the search for the truth, can be solved only by a personal encounter with the trustworthy word of the living God, culminating in a prayer against lies (which are the opposite of accurate knowledge!) and for provision from God.

Those of you who are familiar with the modern discipline of epistemology know that it has back itself into a corner. There is no consensus on how human beings can know anything or whether our knowledge is reliable. Well, the Christian faith has a solution to that problem. We call it faith, personal trust, encounter — and Agur experienced it thousands of years ago.

### I. How Agur Felt: Wore Out, v. 1

This is now the sixth of the seven sections of Proverbs. We finished looking at the final one of Solomon's proverbs last Sunday (about how the righteous and wicked are abominations to each other). That proverb concluded section 5, the proverbs of Solomon copied out by Hezekiah's men. Now this sixth section moves swiftly on toward the end of the book, and it contains more

of the “riddles” the prologue mentioned than any of the other chapters of Proverbs does. The riddles are in the form of numerical sayings, which we’ll look at next week. But the first section of Agur’s oracle is a meditation on how the human being comes to know. He begins by declaring something — the translation here is very murky. Literally, it appears to say “to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal.” But why would Ithiel be named twice if the word is supposed to be a proper name? It could also be the phrase “I am weary,” as many modern translations render it. I believe that this is likely the correct translation: Agur testifies to the weariness induced by the search for truth.

## **II. What Agur Knew: Nothin’, vv. 2-3**

That search had taught him only one thing: his own ignorance. Other people might have some genuine knowledge, in accordance with their innate ability to know. He lacked such knowledge. Thus, he compares himself to a beast. Beyond ordinary human knowledge lies the greater knowledge, the knowledge of the Holy One which is also known as wisdom. Agur says that he doesn’t know that, either.

Now, what do we make of this statement? Is Agur literally ignorant of everything relating to fearing God? If so, why on earth is he writing Scripture and instructing us? Well, the best way to understand this, I believe, is to ask what makes ignorance stand out. How do you begin to feel ignorant? The answer, of course, is by being in a group where others know what you don’t. If you don’t know how to solve quadratic equations and you’re surrounded by a bunch of other people who don’t know that either, you will not feel like an idiot. You’ll never experience ignorance of quadratic equations as a privation. In fact, you will feel that you have quite enough knowledge for what you need to do.

Well, in broader terms we can say that it is knowledge that makes ignorance stand out. You won’t know you’re ignorant unless you get a little knowledge, or at least learn that others possess some knowledge which you lack. Agur felt so ignorant because he had begun to know something!

Let’s approach this another way: Which of you, as over the past two years we’ve eaten our way through the smorgasbord of wisdom that Proverbs lays out in front of us, has heard a portrait of the wise son and said, “Whoa! That’s me!”? Anyone sat out here week after week and just come away shaking their head and saying, “Wow. I had no idea I was so wise. I had no idea that my way of thinking so perfectly dovetails with Christ’s way of thinking. Frankly, my own level of wisdom shocks me”? I certainly hope that none of you have done that. Speaking for myself, as I prepared these sermons week after week, I was more often coming away saying “This description of wisdom is so far beyond me it’s not even funny.” The blessed man is in the fear of the LORD all day long — but I’m not! The wise son foresees evil and hides himself — but I’ve been bitten repeatedly. The fool with his mouth destroys his neighbors — and lots of people have come to me over the years and shared with me how I hurt them deeply with my inconsiderate, rude, and nasty speech. Am I a wise son? By the grace of God I am. But I could hardly claim to fear the LORD as I ought to.

That's what Agur is talking about here. He is saying that he simply doesn't live up to what he knows. When he looks at the people around him, he feels like a brute animal. He doesn't meet his own minimum standard.

As we'll see at length next week, Agur's favorite theme is humility. He radically disapproves of arrogance. And so he is not proud as he considers his own intellectual attainments.

How would you rate your own knowledge and fear of God? If you had to measure your own wisdom, what would you say? If you compare it to the people around you, you'd be tempted to say you're doing pretty well. But Agur compares himself to the people around him only after he has compared himself to the Almighty. As he puts it, he doesn't know the Holy One — yet it would seem that to know the Holy One is a prerequisite for full humanity. You don't have to be healthy to be human, and you don't have to know God to be human. But you do have to be healthy to feel human, and you do have to know God to live human life as it is supposed to be.

So at this point, Agur puts forward what he learned: That the way out of brutishness is by the most human of activities, listening to personal speech.

### **III. How Agur Learned: By Heeding the Word of God, vv. 4-6**

Agur tells us, by implication, that the way to knowledge is through encounter. We don't know by abstract rationality, but by embodied relationality. Agur implies this by first saying he knows nothing, then telling us that God knows and that God is a personal being with a name who speaks, protects, and rebukes. Furthermore, the rebuke of God distinguishes between truth and falsehood, thus leading us back to the topic of knowledge. The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. Agur found that out particularly in relation to the word of God.

#### **A. "God Knows:" Human Knowledge Isn't Enough, v. 4**

We have this saying: "God only knows." You have to say it just a certain way, with a puff of disgusted air, to indicate that no human being knows and you most certainly don't know. And brothers and sisters, that is the obvious answer to the questions of v. 4. As at the end of the book of Job, the questions are designed to highlight the reality that human beings could not possibly do any of the things mentioned. No one has ascended into Heaven and come down. No one can hold the wind, wrap the water, spin the earth — at least, in Agur's day, no human being had done so. God only knows who could do these things. No normal human being could! And of course, that is the point. You and I have not gone up to heaven and come down. We don't know what God knows, for He alone is the one who is in heaven yet spins the earth.

Most of us have accepted our human limitations. We think we can get along just fine without the ability to gather the wind in the hollows of our hands. But read in light of Agur's previous claims to be subhuman in his stupidity and ignorance, v. 4 takes on a sinister cast. If you don't know the Holy One, and failing to know Him makes you subhuman, and yet one can't know him because He's so exalted, what's the point? This admission of failing to know God would seem to also be an accusation leveled against the rest of us, who thought we were content with mere human knowledge of earthly things. Agur seems to suggest that in actual fact, to fail

to know God is tantamount to failure to know anything worthwhile. If you don't know who has gone to Heaven and come back down, if you don't know who controls the winds and waters and spins the earth, then you don't know what a human being needs to know.

### **B. God's Name: The Personal Foundations of Knowledge, v. 4**

Remarkably enough, though, the solution to this ignorance seems to be not to go investigate the world and accumulate a huge pile of facts — at least, not in the first instance. Agur does go out and discover facts about the world in the rest of the chapter. But here in v. 4, he winds up his protest of ignorance with an appeal to learn God's name and His Son's name. If you know this, he seems to suggest, then you have transcended human ignorance and attained the knowledge of something worthwhile.

And with this claim, we are back to ch. 9, which told us that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. To know that His name is Yahweh and His Son's name is Jesus is necessary for genuine human knowledge. Why? Because knowledge is not primarily abstract or objective. Rather, it is primarily relational and connecting. "I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care." Why does every human being have that attitude? Because that is the attitude that God has, and the attitude that He built into us as His people.

It's not "do you know how tall I am?" but "Do you know my name?" That's what we care about. We are more interested in whether the other person remembers that we don't like coffee than we are in whether the other person can do quadratic equations correctly.

So Agur, worn out and ignorant, tells us quite clearly that we need to know God's name to have knowledge worth the name.

We've talked about this in terms of the Romanian orphanages. We've talked about how without that personal connection initiated from the outside at birth, the human person withers and dies, at the very least failing to thrive, learn, and speak. But the key point is that just as the knowledge of the Holy One is the condition under which we can begin to learn, so it is the condition under which we continue to learn. Without knowing Him, you can amass facts, but you will lack understanding. You won't understand what they actually mean, any more than the untouched, unconnected with, unloved child in the Romanian orphanage can understand the bond between normal children and their loving parents.

### **C. God Speaks, v. 5a**

So you and I know the name of God. We know that He is Yahweh and His Son is Jesus. Yet to that great truth Agur adds another declaration: God has spoken. He has words! We know these words, and we know that they are pure. Agur emphasizes their purity by quoting Scripture. This particular verse comes from Ps. 18. The son of Jakeh may not have known anything, but he knew his Bible.

In other words, when faced with your own ignorance, where do you go? Do you just say "Ignorance is the human condition; I will be dumb and proud of it"? Do you manically try to investigate everything you can, piling up as much trivia as humanly possible? Or do you turn to

the word of God as your way of making sense of everything you have learned, seen, heard, and read? Agur did the last of these. He went to God's flawless words. We speak of inerrancy and infallibility; the Bible simply speaks of itself in terms of perfection. These words are spot-on. They are so right that to alter them would be to make them worse. If you actually believed this, what would you do? You would read Scripture and memorize it! You would be familiar with the contents of the Bible, because it is the only perfect book.

#### **D. God Protects, v. 5b**

But in his quest for wisdom, Agur found not only that the Bible was perfect, but also that God shields His people.

What does it mean to take refuge in God? It is a spiritual metaphor taken from the physical practice of hiding inside some kind of fortified building. David hid from Saul in a cave. Cities in the ancient world hid themselves behind walls that would keep would-be attackers out. The Christian, similarly, takes refuge in God. We do this not by going to a physical location and locking ourselves in, but by committing ourselves into the hand of God and His providence. We exercise faith in Him, trusting that He will care for us, provide for our needs, and protect us from our enemies so far as it serves His glory and our own good.

There are many stories of God's people protected from those who would harm them. There are also many stories of God's people hunted down and killed, imprisoned, or tortured. Does this mean that God's protection is unreliable? No. It means that shielding us is not His ultimate purpose. But it is one of His desires, and other things being equal, the righteous enjoy a definite measure of protection.

#### **E. God Rebukes, v. 6**

The final piece of wisdom that Agur learned was to keep God's words untouched. Don't add to them, because God will rebuke you if you do. That is, God is not only a God who speaks and protects. He is very much a deity who is concerned with the behavior of His worshippers, and He will call you out if you lie about Him. Adding to His words is what Eve did in the garden when she told the serpent she and her husband weren't allowed to touch the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adding to His words is what I do when I say "God says keep the Sabbath day, and that means no laundry on that day" or "God says 'Wives, submit' and I expound that to mean "Wives, don't ever tell your husband he's wrong." Don't add to His words! If you do, you will be found a liar. In other words, far from having escaped the trap of human ignorance, you will actually be welding reinforcing bars across the exit from the trap. You will have become a liar, and the liar is a person who is mired deep in ignorance, confusion, and lack of true knowledge. You see, when you begin to tell lies, you eventually start to believe them. If you say it enough times, you forget that it's a lie. We call this "self-deception." You won't confuse God about what He really said — but you will definitely confuse yourself about what is real and what is fake.

To know the Holy One is the beginning of knowledge. If you know Him but ignore that knowledge and start to tell lies about what He's like, about what He said, and about what He will do, then you are still ignorant of Him and thus unable to understand any of His works correctly.

Imagine that I thought C.S. Lewis was a first-century Jew who wrote part of the New Testament. Would I be able to understand *The Great Divorce* properly if I thought it was a book of the NT? Would I be able to understand *Till We Have Faces* if I thought it were genuinely written by one of the ancients?

So God rebukes. Don't add to His words! If you do, you have not attained the knowledge that can be yours if you listen to the word of God and believe it.

#### **IV. What Agur Prayed, vv. 7-9**

Following this very brief discussion of the word of the God who has a name and a Son comes the only prayer in the wisdom books of the Bible. That's right: Wisdom is concerned with how the wise son thinks. It does not speak often of how he pursues devotional exercises to relate to the Father. Except that here it does! What is the message? Well, we just now saw the first prong of Agur's approach to overcoming ignorance. That prong was the word of God, heard for what it says with nothing added to it. Now he adds the second prong: Prayer. Knowledge is personal, relational — and that means that you need to pray against lies if you are going to understand the truth. In this era of fake news, when the charge "You're lying" is leveled at all sides of the discussion, often with more than a little truth in it, we desperately need both prongs of Agur's approach if we are to find out and live the truth.

##### **A. Against Lies, v. 8a**

So the first part of Agur's prayer is a prayer against lies. He makes this request with the special urgency of a dying man. Why does he mention that he is about to die? Because he spent his life in the search for truth and he doesn't want to give up on it now. Do your prayers have the urgency of a dying man? Do you beg God to keep His promises to you while there's still time, before you perish? And do you pray against lies? Agur begins with this petition against lies, and he explains it further in v. 9 by saying that if he gets too rich or poor, he will be tempted to be an awful liar. He will lie about whether he knows God if he gets rich. He will say "Who is Yahweh?" In other words, he will be back where he was in v. 3, ignorant of the name of Yahweh and His Son. To be in such a situation is to fail to have even the understanding that a human being ought to have, much less the kind of full understanding that the wise son should enjoy. Similarly, if he gets too poor he might profane God's name by theft. This takes place when the name of God, which is holy and set apart from ordinary use, is placed on someone who steals for a living. "This servant of God had to steal! God didn't take care of him." If you give that kind of ammunition to the enemies of God, you profane His name.

Do you steal? Do you motivate your prayers by this desire to hallow God's name? Notice, after all, that Agur first prays for daily bread and then for God's name to be hallowed, while the Lord's Prayer requests these same petitions in the opposite order. In both orders, the name of God is key, and it is best honored when we live within the boundaries of His provision.

So Agur prays against lies. He does not want to fall back into animalistic ignorance; he desires instead to serve God perfectly by knowing His name, His Son's name, and listening to His word rather than making up nonexistent parts of His word.

### **B. Against the Temptations of Socio-Economic Status, v. 8b**

Secondly, though, the son of Jakeh prays against socio-economic temptations. He doesn't want poverty. This is a prayer we have all prayed. I don't desire poverty, and neither do you! And so to pray against it is a no-brainer. Though how often have you prayed against poverty because you want to see God's name hallowed? That is, have your anti-poverty prayers been moved by the holiness of God's name, and how often have they been moved by a desire to enjoy the nice things of life and be spared from the destitution, shame, and misery of poverty? I can tell you that I pray for provision all the time, but it's rarely out of a heart for God's glory. Agur, though, was so relieved to have found the truth that he no longer cared about starving compared to how much he cared about glorifying God and hallowing His name.

And because that was his motive, he prayed also against wealth. How often have you legitimately, sincerely prayed "Don't give me wealth"? Not too often, I would guess, because I don't pray it very often! Indeed, I never pray it except when I am quoting this model prayer of Agur's. Yet we clearly know that the desire for wealth is not a desire for godliness, and this urge to accumulate more possessions and grow the size of our homes, budgets, cars, bank accounts, boats, and retirement savings generally has little to do with prudence and everything to do with greed. Agur didn't care. When he learned that he could transcend animal ignorance and find human understanding by listening to God's word and approaching God in prayer, he added these petitions against wealth because wealth will make you forget God. I don't need Jesus; I have a vacation home in Hawaii! It sounds stupid, and yet many people actually think that way.

Do you spend more time thinking about money & stuff (aka wealth) or about how to glorify and enjoy God? Agur condemns me here. I spend a ton of time thinking about money and stuff, especially lately. Today I hope to install a heater in my basement. I love thinking about that, scheming for it, planning for it. Why? Because it's wealth. And when I'm thinking about wealth, I'm not thinking about my heavenly Father. Agur didn't want to stop thinking about God and His word. Agur was so delighted by the ability to understand that knowing God had given him that he was unwilling to have it ruined, even by getting rich.

### **C. For God's Provision, v. 8c**

Yet that said, he did not want to be starving either. Instead, his desires centered on God's desires for him. "Feed me with my allotted portion," the Hebrew literally reads. Can you pray that? The point is not that you're asking for some particular amount, "enough for one day" or something like that. The point is that you're asking for God's will and God's provision. That is true wisdom. Those are the words of someone who has come to know the Holy One. I don't want wealth; I don't want poverty; I want what my God provides.

Agur was weary from searching for truth. But he found God and the word of God, and he responded in prayer to those things. After attaining the knowledge of the Holy One, he was able to walk by faith in God's provision. Can you do that? Is what God gives enough for you? He can wrap the waters in His cloak. Do you think He can give you your next meal?

Let's pray, because we trust His provision. Amen.