

Proverbs 30 - Papendorf

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Date: 08 February 2026

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[0:00] Okay, good afternoon, welcome. If you're a visitor, we're glad to have you. I'm Dave Papendorf, one of the pastors here. We've been studying Proverbs together over the past few weeks, which is a unique challenge. As you just heard, and as we'll experience in a few minutes, Proverbs is maybe a bit strange to us in our Western American contexts, and so fittingly and occasionally to gasps, we have been getting creative. Okay, a few weeks ago during Dan Godoy's sermon, you remember how he choreographed that a stuffed animal sloth would be raised aloft among the congregation? You remember that?

I wasn't here. I heard that people who stared at it became less lazy, and well, Tad last week had a whiteboard, which is wild. As for me, in my house, we didn't want to miss out, so I released a bunch of lizards in the warehouse, and also kids' ravens, so listen to your parents.

For sure. Okay, jokes aside here, Proverbs calls us to be wise, to be wise women and men, and being wise or having wisdom is not the sort of thing that is, I don't know, always easy to grasp. Wisdom doesn't always fit in kind of a static or uniform category. There's not a singular definition of what it means to be wise in every situation necessarily, and wisdom can kind of resist the stuff that we like. We like consistent, universal application. We like slogans. We like formulas. But that's not how Proverbs work, and we're still meant to study them. To seek wisdom is the call of the student of Proverbs, and if you're listening closely, that's also the call of those who follow Christ, whose wisdom is folly, whose weakness is strength. More on that in a few minutes. Okay, this passage, Proverbs 30, here's the word I'm using, enigmatic. Okay, not weird, not strange, definitely those two. Super cool, I would say, also, but enigmatic, that's the academic word we're going to go with here, and it presents challenges, but I think exciting wisdom if we're listening and looking. Let's pray. We need help as we study. I need help. Let's pray one more time. Lord, as I preach this morning, sinner clay jar, we ask that your glory would be made known, that it comes from you. Grow us as we study and think and hear your word this morning as we read ancient texts for Christian instruction. We ask all of this by the spirit that you so richly pour out in your son, Jesus. Amen.

Okay, five quick things about Proverbs. Five quick things to remember. One, you know this already, but a reminder. Proverbs is virtue, formation, literature. It's a body of literature that's trying to form people and shape people, make people, women and men, into those who know how to act wisely when they encounter a situation, whatever that situation might be. So formation is the sort of thing we're hoping to grow in and look for, but being formed into this sort of person has this ultimate goal, trajectory, telos to it. Okay, Proverbs is very much in the horizon of our life, the things that we experience, but being a wise person moves above and looks beyond that horizon a bit. Jesus clarifies that for us, as we'll see in just a bit. Okay, so virtue, formation, literature. Thing one. Thing two, let's talk about the structure of Proverbs because, well, we're at the end now. There are speeches. There's these famous speeches, chapters one through nine. Then there's a bunch of sayings, chapters 10 through 29. And then there's these two speeches at the end, weird speeches from weird people that we really don't know anything about. So speeches, sayings, speeches. And we gave a little bit of a sampling of all of them as we preached. If you remember a number of weeks ago, John preached on Proverbs 1. And this introduction to Proverbs is a call to choose wisdom's riches before reaping fool's rewards. Okay, Daniel was next. He preached from Proverbs 2. And Proverbs 2 describes the wisdom that God gives as priceless and gives all of these mining metaphors. You must dig for it and seek it. So speeches. Then three weeks on sayings. Okay, so Dan preached on sloth. I mean, stuffed animal detail to be sorted out later. Here's what he said.

[5:22] People grow in wisdom through habits of diligent work, but are destroyed by slothful leisure. That's a collection of what the Proverbs say on sloth and work. John, a few weeks ago, talked on speech. Wise speech cultivates life. Last week, and connected somewhat to our passage, Tad preached on wealth in Proverbs. Here's what he said. The trajectory of the wise bends towards wealth in the book of Proverbs. Very interesting. So we've got some of that preloaded. We've got the structure. All right, virtue formation. The structure of Proverbs. Three things left. Proverbs is Eastern wisdom. It's from an Eastern wisdom tradition. It resists some urges or expectations that we might have for wise sayings or Proverbs. Okay, we've got these Western canonical Proverbs or sayings.

The early bird gets the worm. So the person who's first to work or works really hard is likely to ensure success. That's like a rule that might work. I don't know. We like that. But Eastern wisdom traditions are not always that way. They call to reflect, not necessarily always to action. They're observational. They can be circumstantial. They can sometimes seem like they don't agree with one another. Can I give you an example? Proverbs 23 says, who has woe? Who has sorrow? Those who tarry long after wine. Woeful, sorrowful people can be people who drink a lot of wine. Proverbs 31 says, let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. It's wise in Proverbs 31 to drink wine.

So what is it, Proverbs? Is it one or the other? Well, it's both. And how do you know when which is which? Well, you read Proverbs a lot. Okay, number four, let's talk about at least a little bit the composition of Proverbs. We talked about the structure, but the composition, this is an edited anthology. So someone didn't sit down and write verse one to verse whatever the last verse is. We don't really even know who put the book together in the way that we have it and we read it. There's identifiable structure and editing for sure, but this was probably compiled when God's people, Israel, were in exile and they didn't have the temple. Proverbs doesn't talk a lot about the temple. Have you noticed that? But it gives wisdom for living. Okay, Solomon's wisdom is here. Other people's wisdom is here too. This is an edited anthology over time. Don't be nervous about that. Psalms is like that too. We don't need to be worried about that. Okay, thing number five is that Proverbs is Christian scripture. That's important and obvious, but let's be mindful of that. It's for us.

Proverbs is recognized as scripture by the New Testament, by early Christians, of course. It's wisdom teaching that's not at odds with the New Testament. And it gives a lot of texture to the way that we as Christians think about what is truth and what it means to know something. Truthfulness or epistemology, there's a word for you. Proverbs gives us a better vision of those things. Have you ever thought what it means for a thing to be true? Probably. Have you ever thought what it means to really know a thing or how you come to know a particular thing? Maybe not. Proverbs helps us think about those things. There's a helpful theologian whose name is Kevin Van Hooser. Here's what he says, that truth in Proverbs is like know-how. It's fittedness to a particular situation. For a thing to be true, it means that it is suitable to a moment. It's the suitably right and godly word to say or thing to do or judgment to make. God's created order grounds all these things in Proverbs.

Okay, those are the five things. That's a lot of prelude for Proverbs 30 and 31. Where's John? John, you're welcome. Blessings on you and your house. It's worth it, I promise. Stick with me. Okay, Proverbs 30 is a speech. It's a speech from this guy. We'll talk about him in just a second. Agur is his name. It's got three different styles of discourse or dialogue, writing. There's direct address, so this guy is talking. Agur is talking. And then there are some one-liner proverbial sayings. We see those. And then there's this unique thing, these numerical Proverbs. Three things, four things, that kind of formula. Okay, scholars have talked about Proverbs 30 especially as a prime example of something they call creation wisdom. And what they mean by that is Proverbs 30 points to things in the natural world and tells us something about God's wisdom through those observations.

[11:04] So the created world functions as a reference point or a teacher to a person who's being formed. And you can learn by just looking around and seeing. We're doing so thoughtfully, at least. Okay, scholars have been thinking about this for a long time because Proverbs 30 is, like we've concluded, enigmatic. That's the word, right? And so is this the through line, the connective tissue of Proverbs 30? Maybe, maybe not. But

there are many examples of this idea, creation wisdom here in this chapter. Okay, and then our author, Agur, son of Yake. All right, Solomon, sure. Hezekiah, okay, we've heard of him. He's fine, I guess. But Agur, not a person we know. Probably not a lot of children of Christian parents who have named their child Agur Agur or something like that. Agur is likely an Egyptian name. So this guy is probably an Egyptian court official. That means somebody who works for Pharaoh. Those are not the good guys in the Bible.

But a Gentile court official, maybe in Egypt, maybe somewhere else, is used by God to speak God's word to us, which is an amazing testimony about how God has used all sorts of people to teach us and make us wise unto salvation. All right. So our passage has some, I don't know, sort of structure to it. When I suggest structure to you, I want you to imagine that every time I give a structural item, there's parentheses and there's a question mark in that, right, at the end of what I say. Okay, scholars, as they're looking at this, and maybe as you were hearing this read and have read this yourself, you wonder, like, what's the, what is this?

What connects all of this stuff together? Is it animals? Is it creation, wisdom? Who is this guy? Are we meant to read this chapter in light of all the stuff that we've already read? How do we understand it? Okay, let me trepidatiously say this. Verses one through nine give us the voice of Agur, a prologue, kind of. So they set the table for how we understand what's to come next, at least a little bit. One through nine is a prologue. Ten through thirty-one, there's a bunch of sayings. In fact, there's seven, and there's connections between them, loose connections and some strong ones.

And then there's kind of a conclusion at the end, verses thirty-two through thirty-three. So prologue one through nine, sayings, ten through thirty-one. Soft conclusion, let's call it. Thirty-two through thirty-three. Bible scholars like structure, so they want to impose something on this. I don't know, it's the Super Bowl Sunday, I'm a jock, you know. This is my day, so I'm not going to impose too much structure here, but the looseness can be helpful. Great. Let's maybe, last thing here before we dive in, let's think about this set of proverbs here, this speech, as kind of an eccentric expert, kind of sharing his thoughts. I think really that's the best way to read chapter thirty. There is an expert who knows these things, who is wise, who is worth listening to, and he's a bit eccentric because of the examples that he uses, but if you listen and as you listen, you learn. Maybe it takes a little while. Maybe you've had teachers like this who are maybe a little strange or eccentric, and it takes some time to catch the rhythm and know how to listen, and that's a good example of what we have here. So, what we'll do is talk through the prologue, we'll look at three specific sayings, and then the conclusion. So, let's start in verse one. The words of Agur, son of Yake, the oracle.

[15:29] The man declares, I am weary, O God, I'm weary, O God, and worn out. Surely I'm too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man, I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

Okay, we've got this oracle, this speech. It's in first-person language. Okay, maybe this is the voice of this guy, Agur. Maybe it's a character that he's created. Either way, this person that we meet, this person who is speaking, connects weariness and weakness to lack of understanding.

I am stupid, I do not understand, catch the exasperation of our wise person here. He's weary, he speaks to God amazingly, this Egyptian, Gentile, wise guy. What he says about God is true about our God, and whether this oracle that he uttered was meant to speak about God or not, it does. We don't know where it came from, when it was given, but we have it here, kind of like the oracles of Balaam, if that sounds familiar to you. These words profess truth about God who gives understanding, who gives wisdom, who gives knowledge, and about us, who don't have it, and who need it.

He continues and asks a bunch of questions. Rather than speaking to God, now Agur, or this character, looks out. Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who's gathered the wind in his fists?

[17:15] What's his name? What's his son's name? Surely you know. These questions are in a series they build to a request to identify who is God, who's done these things, who has created the world, why does it work this way? What is his name? And what is his son's name? Surely you know.

Do we? We do. Agur will tell us something more. Look at verse 5. He knows something that's true about God, that every word of God proves true. He's a shield to those who take refuge in him. Don't add to his words lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar. Agur is a pretty canny guy. He says he doesn't know anything, but he does know this. He knows that God is truthful and God's words are truthful. Now, we're in the 21st century, for goodness sakes, in a crossway warehouse. When we think of God's word, we think of ESV, baby.

But in this case, as we'll see, when Agur is thinking about God's words, God's words are what has been created around him that he can observe and share with us. God's word is wisdom.

And, well, don't add to it because you might need a rebuke. Okay, then he settles into this request back to some first person. Verse 7, Agur or this character, whoever it might be, turns back to addressing God. And here's what he says. God, give me two things before I die. Just the right amount of stuff that I need. Not too much, not too little, so I don't steal, so I don't get greedy. And also keep me away from people who lie and lying.

[19:27] This is what Agur wants. God's word is truth. People lie, and they do. And people like stuff, don't they? Give me just what I need, he says. He thinks this will help him have the proper perspective. And so this is our guy. Maybe not a poorly adjusted guy after all. Doesn't want too much, doesn't want too little, doesn't want to hear lies. He's got a good perspective on our plight as humans.

He's desperate for wisdom. God gives wisdom. That's our author. Okay, let's get eccentric.

Verse 10 and verses 11 through 14 give us examples of unwise, godless, false speech, speech that is predatory. Look at verse 14. Teeth are swords, fangs, knives to devour the poor from the earth.

Speech doesn't always speak life. In verses 15 and 16, we have a set of unique examples here.

Moving from speech to greed, here's what Agur says. The leech has two daughters, give and give.

Three things are never satisfied. Four never say enough. Sheol, the barren womb, the land that is never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says enough. Okay, so you can imagine Agur thinking about insatiable things. Maybe because he doesn't want to have too much or too little. In fact, that's probably why. And he gives us pictures of insatiable things. Things that cannot be satisfied. Like greedy people and being greedy. You know what it means to be greedy, kids. We know what it means to be greedy. To want stuff for ourselves and not want other people to have that good stuff too. Adults, we're greedy too. We want whatever vision of success or wealth or,

I don't know, you pick, that we have in our mind and we are not glad when other people have that. We want it for ourselves and we don't want other people to have it. People who are like this are like leeches. Leeches. Leeches are gross. Seen leeches before. They have two mouths. One hooks on to a person and the other sucks blood out of that person or that animal. This is a disgusting parasite.

Wow. Just like the greedy, there are other things that don't say enough. Sheol. The realm of the dead. Death. Death. Death is insatiable. People keep dying.

The barren womb. The desire of a woman to have a child, which is a good thing, that cannot go away, that cannot be satiated. Sheol. Death has an insatiable appetite for more death. The barren womb for life, neither to be satisfied or filled. This is a grim picture. The world around us works this way or seems to work this way. Agur wants us to think, to sit, to feel, to understand.

Then we should consider how to not be this way. How to not be a leech. How to not see the way that things are insatiable in our world and do a different thing. Okay, so how do we do that? Agur gives us no answer. I'm going to try to give you one. Practice the inverse of greed. Okay, so don't just give generously. It's pretty easy to be generous when it works great for you.

[22:39] And these daughters, there's two of them, give and give. Agur's funny. They cry out insatiably. Leeches just drink blood until sometimes they pop. Again, very gross. Leeches are gross. They're literally sucking the blood out of people to their fill. Greedy people are like leeches.

[24:36] Or the thing that you have is something that you can very easily part with. That's pretty easy. It can be easy to be generous and to be hospitable. But give generously of things that you want.

Okay, maybe at your job, you feel like you deserve a lot more praise than you get. You should find a colleague who does really well and you should give them praise. Give the inverse. Speak life.

Speak kind words to people. Maybe you see someone who you want to be just like and you kind of

hate it that they're a particular way. You should maybe go up to them and pay them a compliment. Okay, kids, how about this? Why don't you notice your brothers or your sisters? Watch them and see a thing that they really like or enjoy or love and help them enjoy it. Maybe offer to do one of their chores so they could spend a little bit more time doing something they love. That helps you be not so greedy. Helps all of us to be so.

Okay, the grotesque imagery rolls on. There's eyeballs and ravens and vultures. Okay, let's move on to 18 and 19 here. Despite the grim realities in the world around us, despite the fact that we are greedy, maybe hopelessly so without God's word to orient us rightly, the world that we inhabit is really amazing too. It teaches us really hard, sad things, but also beautiful things. Verse 18, he writes, three things are too wonderful for me. Four I do not understand. The way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, the way of a man with a virgin.

Okay, this world that we live in, that we occupy, teaches us through its beauty. Three things, four things, this kind of poetic ramp up here. In this case, we have observations of wonderful and incomprehensible things. Okay, some of you have seen an eagle fly before. Have you ever seen an eagle or a hawk just be in the air, not moving, yet not falling to the ground?

That's an amazing thing. How does that work? Eagles gracefully, effortlessly fly. They don't even move, or at least it looks like they're not moving. Okay, snakes. Maybe you don't think this is wonderful, but it really is. Snakes are like a weird muscle tube, and they can just move super fast. Their movement is really unnerving. They can coil up, they can spring, and they don't have joints like we do.

[27:43] That's weird and amazing. Okay, ships, incredibly heavy vessels, sailing with wind that no one can control and can barely predict, just sort of floating over the water, water that you could like pick up in your hands. The relational physical intimacy of a husband and a wife when they're made one. These are amazing things that teach us. Okay, we could do the Western thing, and we could work really hard to understand aerodynamic lift, and you know, updrafts, and buoyancy, and Archimedes, and displacement.

Now you're all asleep. Good. I looked this up. Anisotropic friction. That's how snakes move. The scales help them create some traction. That's not what Agur is getting after, and frankly, he wouldn't care.

This is Eastern wisdom. Things that are at work, and work amazingly just so, as God ordered them. Be wise and see, Agur calls us to. Look at these things that are too wonderful that we can't understand, that occupy the world around us, that we see maybe every day if we live in the ancient Near East.

Be wise. Be wise. See that God is wise to make these things among us which are above our comprehension. That's why we should ask him for more wisdom. Cultivate the skill of observation, perception, wonder. That's a wise thing to do.

Okay. Verses 20 and then 21 through 23, we see that there's a contrast to those who wonder. There's disordered relational dynamics. You can read these closely later. Let's move on to verse 24. We'll get into one of Agur's other formulas. Four things on earth are small, but they are exceedingly wise.

[29:58] The ants are a people not strong, yet they produce their food in the summer. The rock badgers are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the cliffs. The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank. The lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in king's palaces.

Four things are small, but exceedingly wise. Ants. Okay, we know ants are really strong proportionally, right? But ants are very industrious, even though they don't have, you know, big brains like us or something. Rock badgers. Okay, maybe when you hear the word badger, you're thinking of like this really aggressive, super toothsome, big claws, kind of muscular whatever. A rock badger, okay, here's what a rock badger is. Think about a squirrel without a tail, but like a guinea pig proportionality.

So like a dumb furry blob. Sorry to be crass, but that's what a rock badger is. They're not very smart. They're not really amazing. They don't look very cute, but they live in the crevices of rocks. They find a place to live. They live into the created world that God has given for them. You could

Google a rock badger. You would never do it during a sermon, but you could, you know, Google it. You could Google it later. Okay, locusts, very vulnerable, yet they swarm in an uncontrollable way. Lizards. Okay, lizards can be caught by anyone. If you've been to a place in the world that has lizards, little children like to capture lizards, and it's not that hard to grab one. But lizards live in the most exclusive places, king's palaces. Interesting. Agur talks as if all of these animals are a type of people are a type of people, and he shows how each of them acts wisely according to its nature. Okay, so these animals do wisdom in the way and the capacity that they can. They do a wise thing. They recognize how God has ordered the world, and they live in that world in such a way. Okay, like the low-hanging fruit application here is, you know, work hard like an ant or be resourceful like a fox or, you know, be on a team like the locusts. But lizards, though, if you call someone a lizard or compare someone to a lizard, not a flattering kind of thing. If I turned to the wife of my youth and said, you are wise like a lizard, she would not go for that.

[32:56] Okay, the point is not that there's little things that these animals do that we should do exactly like that or find some principled version of that thing that they do. Okay, it's that animals live in their limits wisely as God has created them to in his world. Here's what one scholar says, which I really like here. Better summary than anything I've been giving. The wise act in accord with their nature as limited creatures. They achieve success through their limits rather than by transcending the limits intrinsic to who they are as creatures. Okay, there's a lot going on there. Wise animals and wise people work in accord with their natures. Success is not about transcending what you can do.

And that's a big time Western thing. No, success and living into God's created order is by living in the intrinsic creatureliness, like being who we are and as we can be. Okay, that doesn't mean you shouldn't work hard, try hard, seek to excel. But it does mean that you should recognize that those that we understand as wise and amazing do their living in their creaturely way. Maybe what it means to do so is to know your limits well. Be in a community where you can be wise and be with wise people and act wisely.

Be a lizard. Okay, this last conclusion here. If you've been foolish, verse 32, exalting yourself, or if you've been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth. Pressing milk produces curds. Pressing the nose produces blood. Pressing anger produces strife. Quickly here, some parting advice from Agur.

Cover your mouth. Listen when it's time to listen. Don't press. Don't push. Don't exalt yourself. Instead, instead of doing the thing that humans do, look around and see what God has made. See the way that God has taught us to be wise by even these little things which we think can sometimes be nuisances around us.

As Agur and the Proverbs help us address our immediate horizon, right? We look out at the world and we say, hmm, we can be wise if we look at these animals. If we observe well, if we understand what Agur is getting after, that God has created the world, we can learn from it. We can be wise by having proper perspective. If we have that horizon. Jesus gives us a second horizon beyond that wisdom.

[36:00] The wisdom of the kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is not just knowing the law, but living the law. Jesus puts it this way. Whoever would save his life would lose it, but whoever would lose his life for my sake will find it. That sure sounds counterintuitive. In fact, it's not just how the world works. It's working against the way that the world works sometimes that Jesus pushes us to and challenges us towards. As we approach the best example of that sacrifice and take communion together, let's pray as we close.

Lord, we're grateful for your word. We're grateful that we can study texts that can be challenging, but also help us to grow and understand things in a new way. Pray that you would feed us with your word in the bread and in the cup. And we ask all this through your son. Amen.