

# Desperate Prayer: Dependable Word

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 19 November 2017

Preacher: Canon David Short

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word, we pray that your words would not fall on deaf ears, but that you'd give us the humility through your word to take refuge in you.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Well, Proverbs 30, page 551.

The words of Agur, son of Jaka, the oracle. Most of us, I think, think we're pretty wise.

And then along comes Proverbs 30 to prove that we're not. And Agur is a truly wise man. He's speaking the oracle, which is a technical term for words inspired by God, words from heaven through Agur.

He's probably middle-aged. And he says in verses 1 to 3, I include myself in that group, just. He says, Despite my long life, despite my trying to be wise, basically I don't understand a thing.

[ 1 : 14 ] Which is a great relief to all of us who've read the first 29 chapters of Proverbs. He says, Just look at the way he says it in verse 1.

The man declares, I am weary, O God. I am weary, O God, and worn out. Surely, I am too stupid to be a man. I don't have the understanding of a man.

I've not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One. And that is exactly what it feels like to be a believer. To be wise means to know you're not wise.

To know God means to know how much we don't know God. And Agur is weary, not of God and God's wisdom, but of himself and his own foolishness.

And it's a brilliant bookend for Proverbs. Next week we'll do chapter 31. But Proverbs began in chapter 1 verse 2 by promising that we would know wisdom and understanding and words of insight.

[ 2 : 29 ] Now he says, Because the basic requirement to receive the wisdom of God is to confess that you are not wise in yourself.

The basic rule, we've seen this, of wisdom is to trust God and not to trust your own insight. The fear of the Lord, remember, is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Wisdom's not about your cunning or intelligence. It's about the heart and character formation. It's trusting God with all our heart. And when we trust God with our hearts, it doesn't mean we suddenly have it all together.

It's not a surprise to most of us, but it doesn't mean the Christian life becomes a spiritual spa and suddenly everything gets easy. The ongoing trust in the Lord is doing something completely unnatural because I'm not trusting my own insight and wisdom, but I'm living out of God's.

I want you to feel how contemporary this is. You see, he says, I am too stupid to be a man. Too brutish.

[ 3 : 37 ] Not British. Although that could work too. Brutish. Sorry, don't get upset. He's talking about what it means to be truly human.

And he doesn't have the bleak nihilism of postmodernism. There's no absolutes. You know, I'm not truly human until I discover my own way. It's a unique honesty and it's a unique vulnerability.

By myself, he says, By myself, under my own power, I can't find out what's really true. My rational thought won't take me. My experience and my emotions. That's not the way of true wisdom.

And that takes spiritual understanding to know I don't have any. The grand truth in this passage is that God reveals and opens himself to us.

And the Holy One of Israel offers himself to fools. Otherwise, there is no wisdom and knowledge. Without God, what I have to do is I have to find my own humanity and create my own identity in something else.

[ 4 : 38 ] In my sexuality or my creative expression or my style or something like that. So if you take God out of the picture, human life, it is as though we are born and live all our lives in a spaceship.

Right? No windows. We're hurtling through space. And some of us, some very clever ones, have figured out how to open and close the doors better than anyone else. And they move around different parts of the spaceship lecturing on how the doors work.

But we don't know where we've come from. We don't know where we're going. We don't know what the purpose of this trip is. We don't know why we're on this spaceship. And because there are no windows to look out, we have to be focused on the world inside the spaceship.

And then we have to invent reasons for the purpose, you see. So we have, we've become brilliant at medical technology, but we don't have a clue about how to apply it in the purpose of human life. We parse human rights, but it doesn't seem to make a great change. We deconstruct gender and gender identity without the truth of what it means to be truly human.

[ 5 : 45 ] You just take one example. You see, without God, it's just not possible to know with any confidence what's right or wrong or what's truly good. Unless we have a word from the outside, what is good is reduced to statistics.

Yes? Right and wrong becomes what the majority vote for, what the powerful say. If there is no God, then what is good is going to be decided either by the party or by the dictator or the electorate or the one who has most money or the one who has the biggest army.

But it's only as God reveals himself we know what is truly good and truly right and what we're made for. That's why I think we need to read this and see that the mood, Agur's mood, is not one of despair and desperation.

I'm too stupid to be a man. And that's a very jaunty statement in Proverbs. It is a statement of confession. It is a statement of worship.

It's like Paul when he gets to the end of Romans 11. He says, you know, the depths and height and wonder and inscrutability of God's ways. Who has told him what to do?

[ 6 : 57 ] Or when he's praying for the Ephesians, he prays for them that they will be able to comprehend something of the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God, which surpasses knowledge.

So there's a lightheartedness about Agur, which I really like. Because he's saying what is humanly impossible, God has made possible.

And this has been the point of the whole book of Proverbs all along. That true wisdom, it's not merely intellectual or moral. At root, it's a personal issue. It's a spiritual issue that the human crisis of knowing and doing is actually a crisis of knowing God.

And he comes to the end here. He comes to this last chapter and he says, what's the point of wisdom anyway? What's the point of it? And he gives us two answers from this chapter. So I've got two points. The first one's longer than the second.

And the first point of wisdom is that we take refuge in God. Wisdom is in God. And we receive wisdom when we take refuge in God.

[ 8 : 06 ] And just in case we miss how personal and relational it is, Agur begins immediately with four questions that all begin with who. You see verse four.

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

It's not four times what questions. What is truth or what is goodness? They're not philosophical questions. It's not four times where as though we're on this great search and we've got to find it.

No, no, the question is who, who? And he connects heaven to earth. He goes right across the chasm between humanity and God. And we keep trying to climb up into heaven.

We've been doing it since the garden, since the Tower of Babel. But we just don't have the wisdom to do it. But he comes down. He gathers all the, gazzle the wind and puts the waters in his pockets.

[ 9 : 04 ] And he establishes the creation from the ends of the earth. And then he begins to identify who, who, who. And has two what questions. You see verse at the end of verse four.

What is his name? And what is his son's name? What is your name? That's a deliberate echo from that great day when Moses saw the bush that was burning in Egypt.

The people of God were captive slaves. The bush was burning but it wasn't consumed. And this, you know, Moses, Moses was very afraid of being consumed.

And he said to God, God, if I go back to the people and I say, you know, I saw this thing. And they say, who is this God? What is his name? What do I say to them?

In one of the great moments of vulnerability in the scriptures, God tells him his name. He tells him his personal name.

[10:04] And he tells, and this name which becomes treasured by Israel and treasured by us, it speaks to us because it means God wants to be known. And he wants to know us.

He wants to be our God and for us to be his people. And by giving us his name, he's made himself vulnerable to us. And by that great name, he rescued his people from Egypt. He brought them out to Mount Sinai.

He came to dwell them and he named them. He said, you are my firstborn son. So when Agur says, what is his name and what is his son's name?

Everybody reading this in Israel would know the son's name is us. It's Israel. The firstborn son, the people who belong to him and trust him. Which means that the way in which we come to know wisdom and the way in which we come to know God is by becoming one of his children and joining his people.

And you could be reading the passage until this point and think, well, this is all about the vast power of God and the chasm between us. But there's a massive shift that takes place in verse 5. This is not naked power.

[11:07] It's a picture of closeness and intimacy. Verse 5 is the bridge between what is humanly impossible and what is possible for us. Every word of God proves true.

He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. There are two levels here. At one level, it's about the word of God. And these words are written down for us and form the scriptures.

We can say that every word of God proves true because God stands behind them. They prove true because God himself makes promises and he links our present to the future by his word.

And as we trust those words, they're a bridge to the future and we prove them to be true. And you can't take God's words and make them better or more relevant. They're all his words.

You know, some of us like narratives and stories and some of us like the more doctrinal parts and some of us really like the poetic parts. It doesn't really matter. They're all ultimately from God and utterly reliable. This is Jesus' view of scripture.

[12:13] Scripture cannot be broken. The word of God cannot be broken. Heaven and earth will pass away but God's words will never pass away. But the word is not the final thing.

The word is a means to an end. At a deeper level, this text is about God himself. You see, if you just look at the shape of verse 5, every word at the beginning of the first line is in parallel to he in the second line with a close identification between the words of God and God.

In other words, no verses about the scriptures in scripture are given to us to develop an abstract doctrine of scripture. The purpose of God's words is that by taking them into our hearts, we take refuge in God.

The purpose of his words is not to diminish us or to scold us. The purpose of the words of God instead are so that we might take refuge in him.

He offers himself to be our refuge. I mean, this is amazing language. Those who take refuge in God, in God, inside God. And the fact that he gathers the wind in his fist and the waters in his pocket and establishes the end of the earth, that's all very impressive and amazing, but it's no help, is it?

[13:34] Unless he offers himself to us as a refuge. Because all it reminds us about is how vastly different we are. But here he is, the Lord who knows how foolish we are. He knows exactly who we are.

He knows our desires. He knows where you walk. He knows how weak and self-deceived we are. But he still puts himself forward. He says, come into me. I will be your refuge. And we don't just take refuge in his power.

We take refuge in him. And all that sovereign power and might in the first couple of verses, he's using as a shield to protect us. That's why I think Agur is so humbly happy.

I don't know about you, but when I read the Psalms of David, he talks about a fortress and a rock and a cave. I always think of a damp cave with a hundred men in it, which is a bit smelly and not very salubrious.

But here, to take refuge in God, the pictures, every picture that Proverbs has given us of life with God ravishes the imagination.

[14:39] Priceless jewelry and honor, beauty and family, fruitful life, long life, better than gold and all precious jewels. That to be in God means we can reach out our hand and take from the tree of life.

And do you remember he said that there is nothing that we can desire that can compare with this. Nothing you can desire can compare with the wisdom of taking refuge to God.

And I don't think it's easy for us, is it, to... It's not always easy for us to tell what we take refuge in. One way to find it out is when it's taken away.

And then we're full of anxiety and confusion and despair. And we can take refuge in some of the things that God's given us. But the problem is that we begin to slowly replace God as our refuge and take refuge in something else.

And sometimes it comes out of wounds that we've suffered at the hands or at the mouths of others, particularly when we were young. And what you do then is you take refuge in your abilities or your achievements or your wisdom or your wealth.

[15:49] But there is no acceptance like this. The God who knows us and has made us and knows we are not wise offers himself as a shield to protect us. And we need refuge from all sorts of things.

But the primary thing we need refuge from is our own lack of wisdom and our own lack of understanding. So, what's the point of wisdom? Number one, to take refuge in God.

Point two, the point of wisdom is to live deeply. And this is the rest of the chapter. And I confess there's a lot here I don't understand. So, what's really great is I know you don't too.

Because the best commentary I read quickly passes on to other verses. What we do understand is this is absolutely brilliant.

The pictures we're given here. Because taking refuge in God doesn't mean you somehow withdraw from life. The irony is that you enter into life more deeply. And he gives us seven complicated pictures of what it is to live more deeply.

[17:00] Seven because it's a picture of completeness. And before he gives us the seven, he builds a little bridge in verses seven and nine. They are a prayer. Remember we looked at this in October.

It's the only prayer in Proverbs. Very simple, he says, don't make me too poor. Don't make me too rich. Because it's the one thing that will tempt me, Agatha says, away from taking refuge in you. If I'm poor, I'm going to deny your name. And if I'm rich, I'm just going to forget you. But taking refuge in you, Lord, embraces everything. And it gives him a realism and a skepticism to all those other things in his life that are offering refuge in competition to God.

And the biggest one, and still is, money, I think. And then he gives us seven pictures for the rest of the chapter. And the first three look at what's harmful. And the other four look at what's delightful. But I want to say, just as we move in, we're only going to have time to look at one in the first group and one in the second group. But like a child, Agur comes to all these things in wonder.

[18:10] He speaks of those things that are destructive and he is amazed. He takes his breath away. And he speaks about things that are beautiful and he says, they're beyond me. I'm amazed with delight. Because the humility of God and taking refuge in God means that we can look at life as a given thing, given by God.

And we have the kind of security that means we can look at life more deeply. So let's just look at the first illustration from the first three. The first three go from verse 11 down to about verse 17.

And they're all basically about greed and human desire. How poorly we understand our desires, let alone deal with them. And he takes the first example from the headlines. The greed of wealthy children.

Wealthy young people. Verse 11. He says, there are those, 12, those, those, those. This is a peer group of young people who have received way more than they deserve from their parents.

And who curse their parents, they don't bless them. Nothing's said about the parents. The parents could be very wise and great people. But their children are fools. And in verse 12, the young people have their own definition of what's good.

[19:22] They make themselves the measure of what's good. And in verse 14, they exploit the poor. And they take selfies as they do it because they take refuge in their wealth.

Is this strong enough? Verse 15. They're parasites. Says Agua. Leeches. Very honest, isn't he?

They're never satisfied because they've taken refuge in the wrong thing. It's a warning for us. If we take refuge in the wrong thing, it's going to eat us alive. And it's interesting, too, that taking refuge in God doesn't make you sentimental, doesn't withdraw you from the difficult realities of life. It launches you to see things clearly. And the last four are verses 18 to 31. He's still full of childlike wonder. Let me just take one illustration.

Verses 18 to 20. 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.

[ 20 : 24 ] The way of a ship on the high seas. And the way of a man with a virgin. And then he adds, verse 20, the way of an adulteress. She eats and wipes her mouth and says, I've done nothing wrong. Now, again, there's a lovely trust and humility here because he says, I just don't understand this.

And it leads him to worship. And he's open-mouthed at the way of four things. The way of the eagle in the sky. Defying gravity. Just floating around in this space.

Soaring in the heavens. Leaving no trace of itself. Absolutely wonderful, he says. I understand it. Or the snake on a rock. You know, no legs, no arms. Doesn't slide off the rock.

Leaves no trace. Absolutely wonderful. And he comes to human things. He says, the way of a ship on the high seas. Human endeavour. Humanity is defying the unfathomable depths of the ocean. Leaving no trace. Moving from one place to another. It's just amazing. Wonderful. And then he says, the way of a man and a woman in sexual intercourse. There's mystery and magnetism beyond what's physical.

[ 21 : 28 ] There's two human beings unite in covenant unity. It's just amazing to him. And he is realistic enough to mention the married woman who happily shatters families in prostitution.

Blind and justifying herself by saying, it's only a physical desire. It's just the same thing as eating lunch. Don't you dare judge me. Well, I've skipped over a lot.

If Agur were here today, I think he would try to give us two takeaways. Two things for us to do out of this chapter. One has to do with our hands and one has to do with our feet.

And the first thing is, put your hand over your mouth. I wonder if we should all do that.

No, no. Just look at the last two verses over the page. If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, it's the same thing.

[ 22 : 36 ] Devising evil, same thing. Put your hand on your mouth. For pressing milk produces curds. That's a negative thing, by the way.

Pressing the nose produces blood. And pressing anger produces strife. Agur is not talking about words. You know, when your words are too many, you should just shut up.

He's talking about something else. He's talking about standing before the miracle of life and your own foolishness and being staggered. Do you remember on 9-11 when the planes, you know, the New York towers were destroyed by the hijacked planes, killing 3,000 people?

There were a string of astonishing photos the next day in the media. And one of the photos I vividly remember was a photograph of Tiger Woods. This was before he publicly disgraced himself.

He was playing a round of golf. And when he heard the news, he put his hand over his mouth. And a photographer snapped the shot. And I think the sense in this of both horror and wonder is that this is completely beyond us.

[ 23 : 49 ] And the only appropriate thing to do in this moment is to put your hand over your mouth. And Agur says, I am astonished by my foolishness and my tendency to exalt myself and devise evil.

And every time I do it, he says, I'm churning milk and producing something rancid. So the first takeaway is put your hand on your mouth. Look at your own foolishness and recognize it's way bigger than you are.

You can't deal with it on your own. Look at the things you take refuge in and put your hand over your mouth. And secondly, and more importantly, take refuge in God.

This is a feet thing, spiritually speaking. Let your feet run and take refuge in God. When we come to the New Testament, we hear the true and only Son of God, Jesus Christ, say, Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you'll find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. This is the great invitation of God.

[ 25 : 03 ] In Jesus Christ, his shield is so secure and his refuge is so real, but it will do us no good unless we run to him.

And Christ Jesus becomes our refuge and our shield because he was cut off and without any shield, he endured the judgment of God on him. And so now we can say with the Apostle Paul, Bless God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ, in Christ, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

And as we place our trust in Jesus Christ today, now we die with him, we rise with him, we ascend with him, we are seated with him. Every word of God proves true.

He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Let's pray. Our Father and our God, we praise you for your straight-up goodness, that you put your power at our disposal to shield us and you offer yourself to be our refuge.

We confess together we are foolish and you are wise. And we pray that you would guard our going out and our coming in. That you would enable us to take steps always, to take refuge in you, that place of safety, to know what that means and to live out of that more deeply.

[ 26 : 34 ] We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.