

Part 40: How to Preach the Gospel to Yourself

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We have two weeks left in the book of Proverbs and these last two weeks are unique in the context of the book. There are four primary divisions inside Proverbs and we've been inside two of them for the first 39 weeks of our study.

The first section are the proverbs written by Solomon, this includes Solomon's prologue and stretches through chapter 24. Then beginning in chapter 25 we have more proverbs of Solomon, but they are proverbs which were compiled together later in Israel's history by King Hezekiah's men. This section is kind of the greatest hits of Solomon assembled long after he was gone. But these last two weeks we encounter two chapters written by two different men. Today we are in chapter 30 where we encounter the words of Agur, and next week in Proverbs 31 we will see the wisdom of King Lemuel.

These two chapters are wonderful conclusions to the overall book of Proverbs, and they are conclusions we need.

Today specifically, Agur is going to teach us how to apply wisdom. We have spent 39 weeks looking at God's faithfulness to us in his word, 39 weeks of seeing God's design for creation which causes us to flourish. But what happens when wisdom is obscured, acting on wisdom seems difficult, and the God of wisdom seems far off?

In other words, what does it look like to preach wisdom to yourself when you feel weary, weak and foolish?

We live in a world where many of us are keenly aware of our emotional state and encouraged to lean into it and cater to it, but there are also many of us who distrust our emotions and repress how we really feel for the sake of what is true.

The Bible actually presents a better solution than these two poles and that is a way in which we can engage our emotions honestly while also examining God's truth in a way that doesn't crush or consume us.

In other words what we are going to learn today is how to preach the gospel to yourself when it may feel that God is far from you. How do you remind yourself of the promise of God when the promise of sin seems more real? How do you discover a refuge inside of God's love when it seems the world is a dangerous place for your heart?

Agur opens up this chapter with a kind of biographical sketch which seems to assume few things. First it assumes his emotional distress, second it assumes that the people he's speaking to are on the verge of distrusting God's word, but lastly he lands the plane of his emotions in the hanger of God's truth, but also allows God's truth to engulf the reality of his emotions.

We are going to look at this process of preaching to ourselves in three parts. First we are going to the **Freedom to Feel**, then we are going to examine the **Space to Consider** and lastly we are going to see **Faith to Hold On**.

Why don't you read with me once more our passage today, and see if you can find these three distinct motions in **Proverbs 30:1-9**.

Let's begin by examining our first point today which includes verses one through three and this is the **Freedom to Feel**.

In this passage we see both the experience of Agur's emotions and also the cause of it.

The experience of Agur is a weighty thing isn't it. The man declares twice, I am weary, I am weary, I am worn out. On top of that he feels stupid, he feels ignorant, he feels foolish and he feels alone.

Have any of you been there? I said last week when I preached on anger that God found it helpful to reveal lots of sources of anger in my life. This week when I sat down to write this sermon, I was overwhelmed with a sense of weariness.

The early part of the week I was so focused on where this passage ended, or right reliance and soul restoring refuge of God's. But the latter part of this week I couldn't get past the weight of these emotions. For many of us, this is a profession we can get behind isn't it?

There's this really unique tension in this passage though. The first is that Agur isn't refusing to acknowledge his emotional state. He's laying it all out there in a way which is really intense. Yet did you see to whom he was bringing his emotions? To God.

For many of us we can tend to do one of two things. First we bring our emotions willingly and honestly to others, but rarely do we bring it to God. We bring our frustration, our exhaustion, our weariness, or pains to Facebook, and even to our Christian community. But the first place the Lord would want us to bring these realities is to him. Why? Because he cares for us.

In speaking primarily to pastors but broadly to all God's children Peter exhorts us in 1 Peter 5 to cast our anxieties on the Lord because he cares for us.

It is a good thing, in fact it is a biblical quality of a healthy church to bear one another's burdens. But it is of primary importance that the believer learns to bring their emotions to the Lord.

Sometimes we bring our emotions to others because we functionally think that others will be able to help us more than God! We think that in acknowledging our business and our weariness that they might simply affirm that we are important people with important things. But to bring these things to the Lord is to bring it before the God who refuses to heal our wounds lightly. It is to bring it to Jesus who wants you to be honest with him.

If the first error is to bring honest emotions to others instead of the Lord, the other error is to bring dishonest emotions to the Lord.

I don't mean to stereotype, but this is generally a problem that men wrestle with. We go to God in faux reverence as if everything in our life is ok, but behind our relationship with God is a reality of weariness, weakness, and frustration.

You might think that God is pleased with your strength, but God is not pleased by dishonesty. We don't need to protect God from our emotions.

Jesus wept before the Father and even was so bold as to ask if there were another way than the cross. But somehow we have thought it Christlike to exhibit no emotions towards the Lord.

This does not mean that we approach God without any sort of distinction. Look at how David models this in **Psalms 4:1, 4-5**. Consider also **Psalms 5:1-3**.

Both of these Psalms show that David brings his emotions of anger, distress and pain to the Lord. He even speaks boldly to him saying, "Answer me, give attention to me." But where does it land? It lands in humble submission to God.

He says, "Be angry and do not sin, ponder in your heart and be silent." In chapter 5 he says, he prepares a sacrifice for the Lord and watches.

In other words God is big enough for you to bring your honest emotions to, but then he wants you to voice them to him, ask him for help, and then step back and watch. To simply quiet your soul and watch to see what God might do in the midst of our weariness.

This is such a key piece for us to understand when it comes to God's wisdom because if we look back at our passage in Proverbs we see a cascade of causes of these strong emotions. Look again at **Proverbs 30:2-3**.

It is exhausting to think about life in this world. How many times are we frustrated when we feel we can't find a way forward? How many times do we feel foolish because of poor decisions? How many times do we see real conflicts, real challenges in relationships and parenting, politics and discipleship and think: "I'm not wise enough for this!"

But here Solomon takes the crisis of knowing how to think and act in a broken world and he turns it into a crisis of relationship. Do I know the Holy One?

When we feel exacerbated and we feel confused the biggest question is not what we don't know. For that is so much! The question is what we do know. This is where the process of preaching the wisdom of the gospel to us becomes a distinctly Christian exercise.

As Christians we know our own hearts, we know the cause of much weariness is trying to make sense of a broken world and the only way we can do that without being crushed is to at some point realize the wisdom of a God who is bigger than this world. That is the God who rules, creates and reigns over all things.

So after we give ourselves the freedom to feel the realities of our heart we move on and give ourselves **Space to Consider** this great God. This is our second point this morning and we see a rhetorical challenge interrupt the declaration of the weak man in this text.

Read with me **Proverbs 30:4**.

So here we see the weary and weak Agur start something different here.

I have a friend who is a pastor and he often says to people he's counseling that there's a time to listen to yourself, and there's a time to start preaching to yourself. Here Agur stops listening to himself and starts preaching to himself. He reminds himself of these hypothetical questions which he as the recipient, and we as the reader, are meant to know the answer to.

They are a similar kind of question we hear in the book of Job.

In the book of Job, Job a righteous man is afflicted in many ways and he and his friends are trying to discern why. They have all these chit chats about theology, righteousness, causes and effects. But after dozens of chapters of four knuckle heads going back and forth trying to make sense of their world, God finally speaks.

Look at what he says: **Job 38:1-7**. For two chapters God continues this line of questioning and look at how Job responds: **Job 40:3-5**.

God's goal in the midst of Job's trials was that Job would realize that God is wise beyond measure even if we don't understand what is going on. That he is supreme in his care and purposes and as long as we cling to him, we are right where God wants us to be.

But did you notice how the wisdom of Agur here is opposite the story of Job. Job starts with four guys thinking they can figure this out, and then God humbles them.

But here Agur comes to God confessing his lack and then he himself praises God's power and wisdom.

Job is a story about learning wisdom the hard way, but here Agur models in his first confession what it takes Job 40 chapters to learn.

Why is he able to do this? **Proverbs 1:7**. To preach wisdom to ourselves we honestly consider our weaknesses and our condition, but then we consider the God who is always faithful even if we can't understand how.

Again we see the crisis of knowledge solved with the promotion of a relationship. These four questions are meant to point us to the name of the Lord and his son.

He says, to himself, he preaches to himself, "Surely you know!" But look where he goes next. After pointing us to the Lord and to his son, he reaches this climax: **Proverbs 30:5-6**.

Here is a God who is above all things, a God who created all things, a God who fastened the earth in the heavens and while you might feel stupid, ignorant, alone and foolish, this infinite God has spoken to us.

To think that we have to justify every event, every emotion and every hardship in our world as it stands in relationship to ourselves is a weight which can only make us weary. But here is the freedom of acknowledging the weight of life in humble submission to God at the center. We don't need to know

everything to have peace if we know that God who gives us his trustworthy word in the midst of everything.

Where do we meet this God? Where do we find his name? In his word.

His word which always proves true. His word which some translations say is "tested," others "pure." His word which in every way, regardless of our experience is reliable to give us shelter when we feel buffeted.

Agur includes a reference to the son of God here in Proverbs 30 and he is most likely referring to himself as the oracle sharing God's wisdom. But having the whole Bible we see God's divine intention behind the Son here in this text don't we. What do we need to consider when our hearts and minds are frustrated and weary? The Son who is God's reliable word.

In verse four Agur quotes Deuteronomy asking who has ascended and descended into heaven. Paul picks up this same passage in **Romans 10:6-9**. Who is the one who ascended and descended? It is the son.

He asks who gathers the wind and wraps the waves. Look at what the disciples profess as Jesus Christ calmed the storm on Galilee: **Matthew 8:27**. Who gathered the wind and wrapped the sea? The Son.

Agur asks who established the ends of the earth? **Colossians 1:15-17**. Who established the ends of the earth? The Son.

Agur says every word of the Lord proves true. Look at **Hebrews 1:1-3**. Who is the word by whom the Father vindicates all of his true, reliable, refuge producing power? The Son.

What does it look like to preach the gospel to yourself? It looks at the Son and realizes that God is reliable and trusted because Jesus has proven all the promises of God to be true.

When we feel insignificant, weary and confused, we find refuge in God's word by running to the Son. And when we have found refuge in the Son we return to all of God's written wisdom and we say: this is true! I know it because the word became flesh.

I know this world is disorienting, but I know this God is faithful.

Agur gets out in front of all of our emotions here because did you see what he said in **Proverbs 30:5-6**. He knows that when we feel burdened, and God feels distant, that we will often do one of two things. Add to God's word trying to make promises which the Bible itself doesn't make. Saying things like, well if I repent, or if I pray God will take away all the things that make me weary and worn out. But that's not a promise the Bible makes this side of death.

Or secondly we will look at God's word and say that it's a lie. We will look at the promise of peace in the vices of this world and we will say: I don't believe God's word is true, but I believe the promise of sin. That's what Adam and Eve were tricked into thinking in the Garden of Eden and it proved them to be liars.

The task of the Christian is to rest not in blind faith where we trust in God's promises even when it seems silly. The task of the Christian is to look at the cross of Jesus with eyes wide open and say: His word always proves true. I've seen it on the cross. It looks at those in the church with you where others can come into your distress and say, "I've been there, and God's word, his wisdom, was sufficient. I've tested it, and it's pure."

What we have seen so far in Proverbs 30 is that when we are weary we can run to God's word, but even in our running to his word we are prone to doubt its truthfulness to us, and this is where we pray the most dangerous part of this passage.

This is our final point this morning: **Faith to Hold On.**

Read with me **Proverbs 30:7-9.**

So there's something really unique in this passage in that this is the only prayer recorded in the book of Proverbs. In light of Agur recognizing his wounds, preaching to himself the truthfulness of God's word what does he pray for? He prays for a desperate reliance upon God.

He follows up what we saw in verse 6 and asks God to put falsehood and lying far from him. He knows that when he feels ignored by the people he's preaching to, or when we feel alone in the midst of our own trials, that we are prone to invent false promises in the name of the gospel or believe the false gospels of the world.

Who wouldn't want those things removed from our hearts! Can you imagine the grace it would be if you saw all of God's words as comfortably faithful in the midst of all of your trials and emotions!

But did you notice how he assumes God would do this work in our lives: **Proverbs 30:8-9.**

It's very common for us to pray against our poverty isn't it? The Bible assumes that sometimes in our poverty we again disbelieve God's word and steal thinking sin will save us.

But how many of us are as bold to say: Give me not riches?

The faith to hold on to the truths of the gospel is a faith that realizes that sometimes it is God's merciful kindness to us to strip away, or withhold from us the rich comforts of this world so that we might see what truly comforts and what reliably provides.

Jesus teaches us to pray in this sort of humble reliance when in the Lord's Prayer he says: **Matthew 6:11.**

If we are honest we don't want to pray for daily bread. We want to pray for a pantry full of a month's supply. But God in his infinite wisdom wants us to see that he provides the food and support which is needful for us.

When life is good, when banks are full, relationships are robust, comfort is near and we are full, God knows that we often deny the Lord. Why? Because we feel we have no need for him.

In Exodus 5, Moses goes before the most powerful man in the known world, Pharaoh, and says the Lord wants his people. In Pharaoh's luxurious arrogance, look how he responds: **Exodus 5:1-2.**

We just saw earlier in Proverbs 30 that the most painful and lonely place to be is processing this world without the comfort of the Sovereign King who saves us in Jesus. So how might God choose to spare you from that burden? By sometimes stripping away our comforts so that we daily run to him for what our hearts need.

Many of you were here when Sarah and I had our first miscarriage after our second child. Not long after we became pregnant again, but two months in we thought Sarah was miscarrying once more.

As we sat in an emergency room in California, I considered what got us through the painful first miscarriage. We had a good doctor who helped remove the baby from Sarah, we had an emergency savings account that could pay our deductible for our insurance. I looked at the pain and confusion we had once more and I said: we have doctors, we have emergency savings and we have insurance.

We will get the treatment, pay the bills, and we will be ok.

But then the doctor came in with the most devastatingly wonderful news: the baby was still alive. But it was surrounded by a massive bleed which if it started to bleed, the body could think it was miscarrying and abort the baby. For something like this, they said there was nothing they could do.

God in his mercy pulled back the riches in my heart and exposed the denial: "Who is the Lord?" I had trusted in the gifts of God, but not God. So for the next seven months we prayed every day, many of you prayed every day that God would give us the daily bread. That he would provide for us what we needed to make it through another day, and by his mercy Ellie was born that December.

I know many believers whose stories are different than that. But I also know many believers who in the painful peeling back of the world's riches realized that God is faithful. As David said in his own distress: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

The process of preaching the wisdom of the gospel to ourselves doesn't mean that after we feel, consider, and believe that the world's hardships go away. But it means that we will make it by continuing to see God as faithful in the midst of the storms because we have seen Christ faithful in the midst of the cross.

Preaching wisdom to yourself says "This is hard, I am weak, I am weary, but Jesus you are infinitely good, give me the grace needed today, lead me not into temptation, sustain me, satisfy me, comfort me."

We have seen the end in the empty tomb, we know God will never leave us for he has given us his Holy Spirit. So we come to God and we ask him humbly to feed us with the food that is needful to us so that though we might lose everything, we will not lose him.

Here is our hope, every word of the Lord proves true, he is a shield for those who take refuge in him.