

GET WISDOM!

III. “Big Wisdom in Small Creatures”

8-6-06

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Proverbs 30: 24-28

INTRODUCTION

Our age is impressed by big things. As a child, growing up in the small town of Kalispell, Montana, I was overly impressed with anything big city. In fact, I tended to give people more importance if they were from a bigger city like Spokane. Seattle was *really* big time to me. The fact that I was from a seemingly insignificant town no one had heard of made me feel less significant. And when it comes to people, the more famous a person is, the more weight we ascribe to what they say— even if what they say is in an area they know little about. So, when Opra recommends a book, what happens? Sales go through the roof. If I recommend a book, there may be one or two people that it makes a difference to.

This morning, our text moves us away from the big and seemingly important to four creatures we hardly pay any attention to. But the lessons that Agur finds there offer big wisdom for us. Yes, you heard me right, these are among 33 verses written by Agur. While most of the Proverbs are attributed to King Solomon, this chapter is attributed to a man by the name of Agur. Certainly you could be excused if you forgot that Agur wrote a chapter in the Bible. This would be a good Bible trivia question, “What part of the Bible did Agur write?” He was a wise man living about 3000 years ago, and there is strong evidence that he wasn’t even Jewish, but an Arab.

The six sermons, I’m preaching from Proverbs aren’t following any pattern in going through the book. I’m just picking up several themes that run throughout the book. Here, in these five verses, we have four principles summarized in a unique, memorable way that are interwoven through much of Proverbs, each illustrated by a rather ignoble creature. I’m indebted to a sermon by Haddon Robinson for highlighting this Scripture in my mind.

Let’s look at five of these verses written by Agur.

ANTS KNOW THE TIME

*Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;* (Prov 30:25)

Few creatures seem more vulnerable than ants. They are easily squashed under foot. Yet they are highly successful. There’s hardly a place on the face of the earth they don’t seem to thrive— perhaps not in the Arctic or Antarctica. But, I remember climbing a 14,000 ft. peak in Colorado with our youth group and ants were thriving there. Ants do well because they know to prepare themselves in summer for the winter ahead by storing up food. They are busy all summer long, gathering, preparing for the time there will be no food available. The ant knows what time it is in

life. Out of the past, it has developed the instincts to prepare in the summer for the coming winter. Past experience lead to taking advantage of present opportunities to be ready for what is inevitably coming.

There are a lot of one-dimensional people in the world. **Some live mainly in the past**– driving through life looking in the rearview mirror. The best is always what was. The present never lives up to its glory. For these people, there are plenty of “if onlys.” There are others who **live only for the present**. They live hard. They use up everything. They squander the resources of the past and borrow on the resources of the future. They mortgage future health for current appetites. Don't many of our environmental issues fit here– wasting resources and polluting the earth? We are concerned only about right now and our convenience. And of course, our national debt is borrowing from our future. And, **some live for the future**. They keep living for,

- “when I get out of school;”
- “when I get married;”
- “when I get a better job;”
- “when things slow down;”
- “when the kids leave home;”
- “when I retire...”

But, the present suffers because they are never fully there. There is a lot of magical thinking that at some future date, I'll be able to live like I want to live.

Wise people know, like ants, that winter is coming. Wisdom calls us to use what we've learned from the past to take advantage of the opportunities in the present to prepare for what the future may hold. For some, the winter may be very personal in facing the devastation of sickness in yourself or others you love. Perhaps your family will be thrown in turmoil. Some will face deep personal crises of loneliness, depression, or other inner travails. Security we thought we had can be lost in a moment. Usually these things come upon us before we know it. There is no warning. AND there is no cram time.

Sometimes these personal winters can be so overwhelming, we cannot really study God's Word and prayer seems beyond us. That is when we need to operate on stored-up resources. These include Scriptures you've put into your heart, hymns you've learned, and your knowledge of God's faithfulness. During those times in my own life, I've been thankful for a long history in the faith– stratas of resources laid down from childhood up to the present I could draw upon. They have served me well in times of difficulty and barrenness.

Jesus warns us that there is time of winter coming for the world. Using a different image, Jesus says, *As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.* (John 9:4). And, of course, there are those dire warnings and parables in Mtt. 24-25 Jesus gives about the end times warning of our need to be prepared for tribulation and for His return at the end of history.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the acts of terrorism, the nuclear threats from N. Korea and Iran, global warming, and many other issues we face should all be reminders that winter is coming to our world. It is going to happen. Jesus warns us repeatedly– get ready!

How can we best prepare for the winters of life? Prov 27:12 says,

A prudent person foresees the danger ahead and takes precautions.

The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.

On the human plane, there are a number of things we need to pay attention to, most of which are mentioned often in Proverbs:

- saving money today for tomorrow's unknowns;
- developing a strong, noble character;
- developing and maintaining good, healthy relationships;
- maintaining our bodies through disciplined exercise and good health practices;
- and sharpening our minds.

Even more important, spiritually we need to deepen our roots in the faith. Now is the time to study and memorize God's Word. Earlier in this chapter, Agur affirms,

Every word of God is flawless;

he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. (Prov 30:5)

We need to know the Scriptures so they are readily available to us in times of deep need.

Memorized hymns and choruses can be a marvelous resource. Knowing how to pray, to really take hold of God is invaluable. A life of disciplined obedience to God will serve us well when the crunch comes. We find we've developed backbone and strength that upholds us. And the knowledge we've gained through other believers in fellowship, through teaching, and through reading books is something we can thankfully draw upon in our confusion.

ROCK BADGERS KNOW WHERE THEIR SECURITY IS

coney [rock badger] are creatures of little power,

yet they make their home in the crags; (Prov 30:26)

I've always thought coney were rabbits, so I think the NIV translation here is unfortunate. Most modern translations use "rock badgers." There are any number of expressions of these, including marmots and groundhogs. The regular daily walk Polly and I usually take is on Omak River road beyond Aston Estates where we pass Clarence Hauf's field and Ray Albin's field— both groundhog heaven. There are huge, beautiful rocks, some as large as small buildings, thrusting upward from these fields. As Polly or I draw near, the look-out groundhog gives a whistle and the dozen or so groundhogs that have been lazing in the sun on these rocks scurry to their holes dug down under these huge rocks. These are creatures that show wisdom in knowing where their security lies. They never stray too far from their holes. And, even though we may be 100 yards away, they've evidently been shot at enough to know that people pose a threat even at a distance.

I'm going to use the general term "rock badger" rather than "groundhog" since it gives the analogy a bit more dignity. Their wisdom is in knowing where their security is and staying close to it. Our refuge is God. Earlier, in Proverbs Prov 18:10, we read,

The name of the LORD is a strong tower;

the righteous run to it and are safe.

In Psalms, 23 times the LORD is referred to as a Rock. Psalm 18:2 is typical:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;

my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.

Do you know that the LORD is the only really safe place for us? Everything in this world can fail us— money, people, popularity, power, science— none of it provides absolute security. But, when we belong to the LORD, we are truly secure for all of eternity. We must make Him our refuge, however. This is a choice which involves forsaking anything else that would substitute for our trust in Him. Have you made Him your Lord?

We learn two things from the rock badger: he knows his weakness and he knows his strength. Should a rock badger be very courageous and venture off on his own, he wouldn't last long. If a coyote, wolf, mountain lion, or eagle catches him too far from his refuge, he is dead meat. The rock badgers that survive are aware of their weakness and stay close to their refuge.

Many people know God and trust in Him to some degree but are unaware of their weaknesses. Hence they become vulnerable because they are careless. They think they can handle temptations but end up in trouble. They venture off on their own, ignoring the means of grace that keep them in close proximity to their Rock of Refuge, Jesus. On the other hand, there are those who know their weakness, but fail to realize the security of their hiding place in Christ Jesus. Then they end up living timidly or impotently or are trapped in despair.

If you're wise, you too will know, like the rock badger, your vulnerabilities and your source of strength. In what or whom are you finding security? If not in God alone, you really have nothing at all.

LOCUSTS KNOW THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

locusts have no king,

yet they advance together in ranks; (Prov 30:27)

No single grasshopper or locust is formidable by itself. Any of us can easily kill it. But, when it joins league with others (as in a swarm of locusts), it can do all kinds of damage and becomes literally unstoppable. History records many memorable plagues of locusts. We had one in the during the 20th century in the dust bowl years. Even today with all our chemicals, there are occasional vast swarms of locusts that become unstoppable because of their vast numbers. As Agur observes, they have no king to give them orders, but instinctively they know the value of working together. When that happens, they can strip a field bare in minutes and they can topple kingdoms.

Throughout the Bible, the importance of joining together in Christian community is stressed. Much of the Old Testament is about God forming His people into a nation— Israel. In the New Testament, Christ died to form us into His Body, the church. Jesus was not a loner— He called disciples to be with Him, to live in community with Him. The Holy Spirit gave birth to the church on the Day of Pentecost when the 120 are all “together in one accord” in the upper room. Paul's favorite image of the church as the body of Christ reminds us of our need for connections. A finger is useless and ineffective severed from the body. It needs the other fingers, the hand, the arm, the brain, and everything else in the body to function fully. Things that don't seem connected still are. Should the kidneys decide to disconnect, before long the fingers wouldn't be able to work either.

When believers unite, there is great power. Prayer's power increases. Service and evangelism multiply exponentially. Individually, we are vulnerable. Together, we are strong.

LIZARDS KNOW ABOUT GRACE

*a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.* (Prov 30:28)

I imagine here, the little geckos that cling to walls inside houses in warm climates in places like Mexico. I remember my first encounter with one on a mission trip to Haiti. I was taking a shower and suddenly I noticed him up on the shower wall. I'd never had such a close encounter with a lizard, and anything reptilian almost paralyzes me with fear. I didn't know what it was and that it was harmless. If I'd been a girl I would have screamed— but guys don't have that option. I *very* carefully ended my shower so as to not disturb the lizard. While not confessing my fear, I checked with our missionary about this lizard in the shower and he told me they were harmless little geckos and that people liked having them in their houses to catch insects.

Agur captures the incongruity here of a little gecko on the wall of the throne room of a king. Most people can't get an audience with the king. Think of a visit to the Oval Office. But here's a lizard right in the inner chambers where few people ever get to go. No lizard really belongs there. Here we can see a picture of grace. We are the lizards. None of us deserves to stand before the King of kings and Lord of lords— the Creator of all that is. But, because of God's grace extended to us in Christ Jesus, we are invited into very presence of Almighty God.. We cannot earn our way in. Yet, when we come to Jesus, turn from our sin, asking for forgiveness, and receiving Him into our lives, we are in. That is grace.

CONCLUSION

If you want to live well, heed the wisdom of these four small creatures:

1. Ants challenge us to live prepared.
2. Rock badgers remind us to keep centered in our refuge and strength— God.
3. Locusts demonstrate the power of community.
4. And lizards in palaces remind us that grace is everywhere.

Our hymn in preparation for communion, "Rock of Ages," connects with what the rock badgers and lizards both teach us. It was written in the midst of a real storm. The author, Augustus Toplady was a pastor near Somerset England in the latter part of the 18th century. While taking his walk one day, he was caught in a sudden downpour and took refuge within some sheltering rocks. The place is described as a massive cliff face scored with vertical rifts. The sheer rock wall towers dizzyingly above the path. But within one of the fissures one would be hidden, covered, and unassailable in its all-encompassing embrace. Within that shelter, waiting out the storm, Augustus wrote the words of this hymn.

The hymn affirms, with Scripture that the Rock is Christ. The hiding cleft in that Rock is our Savior's side on the cross— ripped open by the soldier's spear— from which flowed water and blood. Here is our shelter, our refuge, and grace. I especially like that second verse:

"Not the labors of my hands, can fulfill Thy laws demands;

Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save and Thou alone.”

Come to the Lord’s table this morning to receive that grace.