

Wisdom of Observing

Proverbs 30:21-33

Proverbs 30:21-33 - *“For three things the earth is perturbed; yes, for four it cannot bear up:*

For a servant when he reigns, a fool when he is filled with food, a hateful woman when she is married, and a maidservant who succeeds her mistress.

There are four things that are little on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise:

The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in the summer;

The rock badgers are a feeble folk, yet they make their homes in the crags;

The locusts have no king, yet they all advance in ranks;

The spider skillfully grasps with its hands, and it is in kings' palaces.

There are three things that are majestic in pace; yes, four which are stately in walk:

A lion, that is mighty among beasts and does not turn away from any;

A greyhound, a male goat also, and a king whose troops are with him.

If you have been foolish in exalting yourself, or if you have devised evil, put your hand on your mouth. For as the churning of milk produces butter, and wringing the nose produces blood, so the forcing of wrath produces strife.”

Background Notes

For our background notes, let's consider the last verse of the chapter, verse 33: *“For as the churning of milk produces butter, and wringing the nose produces blood, so the forcing of wrath produces strife.”*

Is it possible that there is someone who doesn't understand the first line of this verse? Probably not - although there may actually be some young people who don't know what “churning butter” is all about! What's the point of the proverb?

Notice that this is emblematic parallelism. There are two word pictures that illustrate the last verse line of “anger producing strife.” There is the word picture of churning milk to produce butter, and the word picture of pressing or hitting the nose to make it bleed. The idea in both is agitation or pressure. In one case agitation produces butter, and in the other case agitation produces blood.

In the same way, stirring up anger will eventually produce strife. Constant criticism, angry comments, badmouthing, nitpicking, and finding fault with every little thing will result in strife. A word to the wise is sufficient.

Doctrinal Point

The sayings of Agur contain truth for every believer.

Verse 21: *“For three things the earth is perturbed; yes, for four it cannot bear up.”* Here we have figurative language. In fact, we have hyperbole, or purposeful exaggeration to emphasize the point. The point is that the four items that are mentioned don't literally *“perturb the earth”* or cause earthquakes, but they are so unbearable and insufferable that they actually shake up the order of life and cause great social turmoil.

Remember, we mentioned in a previous Talk that the use of *“for three things... yes, for four”* is a literary style of presenting these four situations. It doesn't mean that an exhaustive list is intended. What four unbearable situations are selected?

Verse 22: *“For a servant when he reigns...”* Watch out when an individual from lowly beginnings gets the power and authority of a king. Although it doesn't always happen, there's a good chance you'll face a merciless tyrant. Hitler is a good example of the truth of this proverb.

“A fool when he is filled with food...” Watch out when a fool becomes prosperous! Before he became prosperous, the fool's sphere of damage was limited. With prosperity, the fool can cause greater destruction and chaos.

Verse 23: *“A unloved woman when she is married...”* The phrase, an “unloved” woman, could be translated as “hateful” woman or “mean-spirited” woman. A hateful woman will certainly cause dysfunction in a marriage - not only in the immediate family, but in the extended family as well.

“And a maidservant who succeeds her mistress.” Watch out when a maid somehow usurps the place and position of her mistress. You get a glimpse of this social turmoil in the relationship between Hagar, Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 16 and 21. *“He [Abram] went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she despised her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.’ So Abram said to Sarai, ‘Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.’ And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.*

Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, ‘Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?’ She said, ‘I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.’ The Angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand’ (Genesis 16:4-9).

And Genesis 21:8-11: *“So the child [Isaac] grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw [Ishmael] the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, with Isaac.’ And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham’s sight because of his son [Ishmael].”*

In Proverbs 30:22-23, notice that all four of the unbearable social situations involve human pride in some way. Then in contrast to the four situations associated with human arrogance, verses 24-28 describe four small and humble creatures that function efficiently, without pride – just as God designed them to function. Many good Sunday school talks have been given from these verses - but these lessons are good for all ages!

Verses 24-28: *“There are four things which are little on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise:*

The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in the summer.

The rock badgers are a feeble folk, yet they make their homes in the crags.

The locusts have no king, yet they all advance in ranks.

The spider skillfully grasps with its hands, and it is in kings’ palaces.”

Verse 24: “The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in the summer.” The lesson of wisdom from the ant is “Don’t be lazy! Prepare for the future.” This has plenty of spiritual application, including investing our treasure in Heaven, not on earth. In His Sermon on the Mount the Lord Jesus said, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).*

Verse 25: “The rock badgers are a feeble folk, yet they make their homes in the crags.” The lesson of wisdom from the rock badgers is “Recognize your limitations. Find your security in a sure and solid shelter.” In your Sunday school talk on this little animal, you’ll apply this to salvation and finding shelter and security in Christ, the Solid Rock.

Verse 26: “The locusts have no king, yet they all advance in ranks.” The lesson of wisdom from the locust is “Cooperate with others, and move forward in an orderly way.” What a great lesson for the body of Christ! Believers can move forward like a mighty army when we cooperate - under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 27: “The spider skillfully grasps with its hands, and it is in kings’ palaces.” The lesson of wisdom from the spider (which is better translated “lizard”) is, “Don’t be surprised if you gain access to high and mighty places!” This spiritual lesson is obvious. In general, we believers don’t have a lot of clout, but God can open doors for us, and even influence world leaders. Joseph and Moses in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon are prime biblical examples.

Finally, in verses 29 through 31, Agur gives a description of three animals that God created with a certain noble and dignified majesty, and then the description of a king in royal military splendor.

Verses 29-31: *“There are three things which are majestic in pace; yes, four which are stately in walk: A lion, which is mighty among beasts and does not turn away from any; a greyhound, a male goat also, and a king whose troops are with him.*

These four illustrations help us appreciate God as Creator and help describe life in this world. All four lessons are about good leadership qualities. There is the strong and brave lion, the king of the beast. There is the fast and graceful greyhound (in this context, a greyhound is probably a better translation than “a strutting rooster,” as some translations render it). In that day, the male goat was often used to lead flocks of sheep and goats.

And then there is the powerful and fearless king marching with his loyal army. This last description certainly reminds us of the return of the Lord to earth with his loyal army (that’s us!) to establish His kingdom. Read Revelation 19.

The sayings of Agur contain truth for every believer.

Practical Application

Start now!

Verse 32: *“If you have been foolish in exalting yourself, or if you have devised evil, put your hand on your mouth.”*

Let me loosely paraphrase this verse with an application: “If you’ve been foolishly exalting or promoting yourself (and haven’t we all been in that category at one time or another?), or if you’ve devised or planned or plotted wrongdoing in any way (and maybe you’re still doing it), then start now by *“putting your hand over your mouth.”* In other words, **stop now!**” This saying is very practical.

Let’s examine our lives in the light of this Scripture - and let’s **start now!**