

A PRAYER FOR CONTENTMENT

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Abstract: Proverbs 30 contains the only prayer in the Book of Proverbs – a prayer of contentment. Contentment appears to be a theme consistently taught in the Old Testament and the New Testament. It was discontentment toward God that drove Eve and Adam to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And until this day, it was our discontentment with God, ourselves, and others, that drove us searching around desperately.

Keywords: *prayer, contentment*

Introduction

Far before the Israelites developed into a nation, their neighboring nations such the Egyptians and the Babylonians have known wisdom literature.¹ Wisdom literature such as the Book of Proverbs did not belong to the Israelites alone. Goldsworthy and also

1. G. Goldsworthy, "Proverbs," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Electronic Edition. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

Longman and Dillard, among others, believe that a wisdom book of the Egyptians, *the Instruction of Amenemopet*, influenced the Book of Proverbs.² The fact that these nations have such literature and the LORD allowed the Israelites to learn from them and even preserved such books in the Bible betrays the importance of these books for the Israelites and our lives.

In fact, several parts of the Book of Proverbs were not even written by the Israelites. One such part written by Agur son of Jakeh of Massa is Proverbs 30. This passage is one of the parts considered hard to interpret, partly because the identity, location, and context of Agur was never really known. Agur son of Jakeh was never mentioned elsewhere either in the Bible or in extra biblical materials.³ Murphy argues that Agur might not be an Israelite and might have been an imagery figure.⁴ Alden argues that Agur son of Jakeh might not be a name at all, and should be understood as collector of proverbs instead.⁵ Several other scholars, including Longman, argue more convincingly that Agur son of Jakeh is a real

2. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 272.

3. Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 517.

4. Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 227-31.

5. Robert L. Alden, *Tafsiran Praktis Kitab Amsal*. Translated by Cornelius Kuswanto (Malang: SAAT, 2002), 277-8. Alden also argues against the unity of this passage.

person and Massa must have been an Arabian tribe, one of Ishmael's descendants mentioned in Genesis 25:14 and 1 Chronicles 1:30.⁶

Several observations reveal that Agur might have been a proselyte. This can be observed from Agur's statement about the possibility of knowing God (vv. 1-4). Agur affirmed the truth of "every word of God," believing its trustworthiness and acknowledge Him as "a shield to those who take refuge in Him." (vv. 5-6).⁷ He also prayed to the LORD and he understood the traditions of the Israelites.

Several of the most interesting verses of Proverbs 30 are recorded in verses 7-9. Proverbs 30:7-9 are very interesting to study due to several reasons. First, these verses comprise the only prayer in the whole Book of Proverbs.⁸ Second, Agur urged strongly to the LORD – he cannot afford a "no," indicating the importance of this prayer. Third, the placement of this prayer nearly at the end of this book made this prayer a kind of honest and open ending reflection before the LORD following the teachings of the previous passages. These are among the reasons why this passage deserve a closer and attentive study.

6. Longman III, *Proverbs*, 518.

7. Ross showed that the word 'true' used in other parts of this book in the sense of refining metal. Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Volume 5*. General Editor Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 1120. Longman and Dillard observed that Agur answered skepticism by referring to divine revelation. Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 273.

8. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 478. Cf. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 229.

Proverbs 30:7-9

A Prayer for Contentment

In one sense, we can call this prayer a prayer of prayer. Agur precluded his prayer with a prayer. So desperate for approval, Agur asked the LORD not to deny his prayer. Agur's urge was evident from three indicators:⁹ (1) Agur switched from indicative mode to imperative mode; (2) Agur escalated "I asked of you" to "deny them not to me"; (3) Agur added "before I die," indicating he needed the prayer answered while he was still alive.¹⁰ Waltke observed that "Agur prays 'with all the intense earnestness of a dying sinner.'"¹¹ Agur did not only affirm the trustworthiness of the word of God, as indicated in vv. 5-6, but also believed that the LORD is indeed his shield, his refuge, and the one who has control over his life and the one who can provide for his physical and spiritual needs. This is an interesting prayer, considering that Agur was praying for contentment, yet he did not content to have his prayer for contentment denied.

In verse 8, Agur poured out his requests in *synthetic parallelism*. In the first verset were two negative petitions, a prayer that the LORD remove far from him falsehood and lying, and a prayer that the LORD give him neither poverty nor riches. These petitions

9. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 479.

10. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 229.

11. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 479.

are deeply intertwined in the themes of the Book of Proverbs. In his first request, Agur indicated that falsehood and lying – something forbidden by the ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16), can emerge out of greed; something talked about in previous chapters of this book. Proverbs 19:22 says, “What is desired in a man is steadfast love, and a poor man is better than a liar.” This verse implies that it is better to stay poor than to gain any profit from lies.¹² In his second request, Agur indicated that either poverty or riches can lead to greed. Therefore, he implored the LORD for neither poverty nor riches. He understood that only “the blessing of the LORD makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it” (10:22).

In the second verset of verse 8, Agur pleaded for “the food that is needful for me” (v. 8c). The Hebrew word for ‘the food that is needful for me’ often translated into daily bread indicate a perfect portion, exactly as one needed.¹³ Waltke translated this verset as “my quota of food.” Food here represent all of one’s need and quota depends on one’s calling and circumstances.¹⁴

In verse 9, again, Agur wrote in *synthetic parallelism*, pouring out his motives for this prayer. On the one hand, he asked not for riches so that he will not forget or deny the LORD in his fullness. On the other hand, he asked not for poverty to avoid any chance he

12. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 116.

13. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 230. The word ‘bread’ means all human needs, while the word ‘portion’ point to the fact that each person has different needs.

14. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 116.

might steal and profane the name of the LORD. Longman reminds us that, of course, not all rich men forget and deny the LORD, and not all poor men are thieves.¹⁵ Observe that the Book of Proverbs neither promote asceticism nor defy riches. Riches is good and is the fruit of wisdom (3:16; 8:18; 22:4). Still, “better is a poor person who walks in his integrity than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool” (19:1; Cf. 15:16; 16:8; 19:22).

From the structure and placement, the core of Agur’s prayer is a request for contentment. Agur pleaded to be delivered from lies – either due to greed or poverty, by asking for contentment. Agur understood that, “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (11:4). Deep below, Agur’s reason for this prayer was his deepest longing for the LORD and his glory. He did not want to deny the LORD – not giving him his due glory, or profane his name by stealing. This is the reason why Agur can not take a “no” for his prayer: it was a matter of the glory of the LORD and not of his own benefit.¹⁶ The glory of the LORD is a must for Agur.

The fact that the only one simple request in the only one simple prayer at nearly the end of the Book of Proverbs was delivered in such urgent tone betrays the importance of contentment in fear of the LORD. In Agur’s understanding, contentment in the fear of the

15. Longman III, *Proverbs*, 525.

16. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 480.

LORD will deliver men from folly and sin, while discontentment will lead into folly, greed and even denial of the LORD.

The Perils of Discontentment

In Proverbs 30:15, Agur pictured the danger of discontentment as a leech with two daughters named ‘Give’ and ‘Give.’ Palestinian fresh water leech has two sucking mouths, one at each end of its body. One mouth is to stick to its host, while the other mouth is to suck blood from its host. Here, the leech is an imagery of an excessive or wicked person whom “take life and wealth from a society instead of enriching it.”¹⁷ Imagine the devastating damages such blood-sucking leech and its two demanding daughters can make. Longman indicated that Agur pictured the leech has two daughters instead of two sons because usually daughters could have been much more demanding than sons.¹⁸ The fact that the word ‘leech’ is a *hapax legomenon*, making its use even more interesting and telling.¹⁹ Nothing is more destructive than discontentment.

In the same verse and the next, Agur escalate the destructive effect of greed by mentioning three things that are never satisfied, and even a fourth thing that never say “Enough:” Sheol, the barren womb, the land that never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, “Enough.” Waltke divided the four things into two groups.

17. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 487.

18. Longman III, *Proverbs*, 528.

19. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 233.

First, Sheol that never stops wanting to end lives and a barren womb that never stops wanting to produce lives. Second, the land that never satisfied with water to produce products and fire that never stop destroying.²⁰

Nevertheless, Waltke detected optimism in Agur through this *chiastic* structure:²¹

- A Sheol
- B the barren womb
- B' the land that never satisfied with water
- A' fire

Waltke believes that Agur was optimistic that while the earth exists, there will always be greedy tyrants that never say “Enough,” but there will also always be righteous people striving to produce lives.²²

The Book of Proverbs is full of teachings about how greed can bring about undesirable loss. Highly useful and healthy things like honey – Murphy believe honey symbolizes everything good and interesting, can become something revolting when consumed excessively (25:16).²³ In the same way, a neighbor who is near, who is better than a brother who is far away (27:10), can be boring or even can be hated due to excessive visits (25:17). These verses, together

20. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 488.

21. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 488.

22. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 488.

23. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 326.

with many others, teach contentment in all things.²⁴ Too much of virtually any good thing, for example sex and food, will have negative consequences.²⁵

Just like today, the ancient world was plagued with free sex. Proverbs 5:15-20 advocate sexual contentment in marriage boundaries.²⁶ The cistern and well imageries used in these verses, also appeared in the Song of Songs. Just as a fresh source of water satisfies thirst, a man should be content with sexual relationship with his wife (Songs 4:15).²⁷ In Ancient Near East, water was so precious, cistern and well are well kept and guarded.²⁸ In the same way, sexual relationship in marriage has to be guarded. Contentment in sexual relationship within marriage boundaries will nullify discontentment and desires for forbidden sexual relationships.²⁹ The Book of Proverbs warns its readers against the most severe punishment of such relationship using the imagery of fire next to a man's chest and walking on hot coals (6:27-28).³⁰

Proverbs 23:1-3 and 6-8 warn against greed in a ruler's feast. Both remind their readers that the feast might not be just a feast, but

24. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 192.

25. Longman III, *Proverbs*, 455.

26. Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 229.

27. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 32. Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 317.

28. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 229.

29. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 229.

30. Longman III, *Proverbs*, 179.

with hidden intentions. Verses 4-5 warn against greed because riches is not true security. It can be gone any moment. Verse 8 remind us that we might vomit up the morsels that we have eaten, and gain nothing with our efforts.³¹ Referring to greed in the ruler's feast, Waltke wrote that the stakes are high – so much so that, if one know he has trouble restraining his appetite, he should abstain altogether.³²

The Book of Proverbs also reminds us that discontentment might produce unquenchable desires. Proverbs 21:25-26 say, “The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back.” Observe how the sluggard is contrasted with the righteous, not the diligent. Observe that, the sluggard is killed by his desire and he craves all day long, while the righteous gives and does not hold back. Estes noted that the sluggard discontents yet too lazy to do anything, but the righteous not only contents, but also gives generously to the needy.³³

Contentment as an attitude against evil has been raised since the beginning of the Book of Proverbs. Right after the introduction (1:1-7), the book warns against evil. The Book of Proverbs shows that temptations to acquire and fill the house with goods can be so

31. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 229.

32. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 238.

33. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 229.

irresistible (1:13) yet can be very deadly because they “lie in wait for their own blood and they set an ambush for their own lives” (1:18).

Just as Agur understood that discontentment bring someone away from God and profane the name of the LORD, the Book of Proverbs reminds us that discontentment will bring no future and no light (24:20). Only “the righteous will flourish like a green leaf” (11:28).

Contentment in the Old and New Testaments

Not only reflecting the Book of Proverbs, the prayer of Agur also reflects the Old and New Testaments. Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21 recorded the LORD’s commandment to the Israelites for them to enjoy their portion and not trapped in greed. For Durham, the tenth commandment was given with definition and applications because this is the hardest commandment to be fulfilled by the covenant community.³⁴ “The tenth commandment thus functions as a kind of summary commandment, the violation of which is the first step that can lead to the violation of any one or all the rest of the commandments.”³⁵ Durham gave several examples:³⁶

Before Ahab’s obsessive desire for Naboth’s vineyard was satisfied, the ninth and sixth commandments had been broken (1 Kgs 21). Before David’s lust for Bathsheba was

34. John I. Durham, *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 297.

35. Durham, *Exodus*, 298.

36. Durham, *Exodus*, 298.

sated, the seventh, eight, and sixth commandments were broken (2 Sam 11-12)... The citizens of Judah in Jeremiah's time, deifying their desires and longing after a material and local security, violated the first, third, sixth, seventh, and ninth commandments, and above all, by making Yahweh's temple into a fetish, the second commandment as well (Jer 7:1-15).

It was perhaps set last in the Decalogue precisely because of this uniquely comprehensive application.³⁷

Notice that the foundation of each commandment in the Ten Commandments is: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). The LORD, God of Israel is able to provide, deliver, and fulfill his people's needs, so that any form of greed is an insult toward the LORD.

In the New Testament, the prayer of Agur finds its parallel in the Lord's Prayer taught by Jesus. Observe the similarity:³⁸

The Prayer of Agur (30:7-9)	The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [not] deny or profane the name of my God - feed me with the food that is needful for me - Remove far from me falsehood and lying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hallowed be your name - Give us this day our daily bread - lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

37. Durham, *Exodus*, 299.

38. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 15-31*, 479.

Besides the similarities in their requests, for daily bread, and to be delivered from evil, notice that Jesus also put the glory and the will of God first.

Not limited to these parts of Old and New Testaments, various parts of the whole Scripture convey contentment in the fear of the LORD as the very basic:

1. "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).
2. "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).
3. "But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content" (1 Timothy 6:8).
4. See also Luke 3:14; 2 Corinthians 11:9; Philippians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 6:6-11; Hebrews 13:5; etc.

Discontentment in the Pursuit of Wisdom

Agur and even the whole Bible teach us the importance of contentment in wealth, social status, sex, and many more, but one thing. There is something we must never be content of, that is the pursuit of wisdom and understanding.

1. "Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of

wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight” (4:5-7).

2. “Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her” (8:10-11).

Wisdom and understanding were utmost important and the pursuit of wisdom and understanding does not know contentment. Proverbs 9:10 could be the explanation of this kind of discontentment: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” True wisdom is in the LORD himself, and we must never be tired of pursuing him. Alluding to Proverbs 8, Paul proclaim Jesus as the “the full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, ... in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Colossians 2:2-3). Only in finding Jesus, will be true wisdom and understanding, and true contentment.

- Contentment is an important issue in redemption history. Created in God’s image and likeness, Adam and Eve were supposed to be content with God and depend on Him. Yet, they were discontent and tried to become like God. They tried to break free from God and ended up bound in sin.³⁹ After tiring and often fruitless men’s efforts, men are now restored. The pursuit

39. Goldsworthy, “Proverbs.”

of contentment is now fulfilled in Jesus, the wisdom of God (Cf. Matthew 11:19; Colossians 1:15; Revelation 3:14). In Jesus, men are restored to their true relationship in God and true contentment. The only request in the only prayer of the Book of Proverbs and also the Lord's Prayer is for such restoration and contentment.

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