

DIARY OF A WISE OLD MAN

by Steve Zeisler

Thurgood Marshall is 82 years old, and this week he announced his intention to retire from the Supreme Court of the United States. In addition to serving as a justice for more than twenty years, many have noted that he probably did more to change the course of this country's history as a lawyer arguing cases before the Supreme Court than he did as a member of it. As you probably know, he argued *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended segregation in schools and effectively outlawed segregation as a legal principle in this country.

Thurgood Marshall himself was the victim of legalized segregation, and I think much of his impact comes from the experiences of his own life. I don't agree with all the decisions he has made as a Supreme Court justice, but it is important to pay respect to someone who has contributed as much as he has, especially at the age he has achieved now.

We live in an area that is famous for 30-year-old self-made millionaires, and in a time in which technology is outmoded six months after it is discovered. Things happen very quickly. Youth is so much in focus that it seems to me we will do well to recall the worth of an old man or woman who has grown wise in the years that they've lived. They have something to offer us that we cannot get any other place. Please turn to Proverbs 30. I've entitled this message *Diary of a Wise Old Man*, and what we have here is the memories and the wisdom of a man named Agur.

Now, you will recall that we have been studying Proverbs in recent weeks. We have been looking mostly at the first nine chapters of the book, where a young to middle-aged father is teaching his teenaged son, who has not encountered much of life yet. The father is telling his son what to expect, giving him defenses against problems, and heading him toward what is right in life. We have come to the 30th chapter now. (We have skipped a great deal, obviously, but time pressures don't permit us to study all of Proverbs.) Here at the end of the book, we meet a couple of individuals: this man Agur and, next week, a man named Lemuel, who speak not to an individual son or daughter; this is more general wisdom. Proverbs 30:1 says:

The word of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle.
The man declares to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal....

Agur is called an oracle. Ithiel and Ucal are apparently two men who hear and record his message. The term oracle means a senior advisor, a learned thinker, one whose point of view has depth to it. Agur is best pictured as an old man who has thought about many things, has been places and seen the world, and who offers the benefit of his learning to all who will listen.

Now, the chapter can be helpfully divided into two parts. The first fourteen verses have as their primary insight the glory of God which illuminates the human condition. We learn a great deal about humanity if we first start with the awesome Creator God. The second half of the chapter focuses more on the creation than the Creator, and there we find Agur looking at things like fires, eagles, snakes, roosters, and all kinds of other things in the created world. His observations of these things have much to teach him as well.

Let's read verses 2-9:

Surely I am more stupid than any man,
And I do not have the understanding of a man.
Neither have I learned wisdom,
Nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has ascended into heaven and descended?

Who has gathered the wind in His fists?
Who has wrapped the waters in His garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is His name or His son's name?

Surely you know!
Every word of God is tested;
He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him.
Do not add to His words
Lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar.
Two things I asked of Thee,
Do not refuse me before I die:
Keep deception and lies far from me,
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion,
Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or lest I be in want and steal,
And profane the name of my God.

Foolish and Wise

Verse 1 announces that this man whose words we are listening to is an oracle, that is, a wise teacher. Verse 2 announces his self-proclaimed stupidity. Now these ideas would seem to be in tension with each other. The teacher, who is supposed to have a lot of insight, someone to be looked up to, begins by saying, "I'm more stupid than anybody. I really don't understand much about God or about life." I think the reason for this announcement about himself is discoverable in verse 4. What he is doing is looking primarily into the heavens: "Who has ascended into heaven and descended?" And then he starts asking questions about God: "Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name and His son's name?"

"Two things I asked of Thee, do not refuse me before I die; keep deception and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches...."

These are very similar to the questions God asked Job, aren't they? When Job got done complaining about how how unfairly he had been treated, the Lord God said, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth!" (Job 38:4.) And he went on to talk about his creative activity. We can imagine him with the wind in his fists and the waters in his garment, establishing the ends of the earth. Job was overwhelmed when he realized that he had spent so much time thinking about himself and so little focusing on God. Well, Agur, too, finds himself overwhelmed. He has thought about God. He is even anticipating New Testament theology: the Son of God who becomes known to us by name. But he realizes there is still much to learn about God; there is mystery there as well. He asks his listeners to think and answer the question if they can about this extraordinary Being, this God of mystery and power.

Once he starts speaking in these terms, the only conclusion he can draw about himself is, "I am very, very inadequate. I feel as stupid as I can be. Compared to the genius of God, I feel like an utter fool." He is stupid compared to everybody else around him. He feels stupid compared to what he longs to know about the Lord and about his world. He's only grasped the tiniest portion of it. Remember the way Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount? "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), that is, those who have grasped their essential poverty, their limits, and their weakness.

Recall Isaiah's experience when he went into the presence of God, before his throne? He fell to his face and proclaimed his own uncleanness. That's what Agur is discovering here, that when he compares himself to the living God, he discovers only his inadequacies, and so he speaks of them before he says anything else. "I don't have understanding. I haven't really learned wisdom. I don't know God as I ought to know Him."

Agur, therefore, has become a humble man. He is free from having to defend his own greatness, from having to worship himself. He has removed himself from the center stage of his thinking, and has therefore become, in fact, a wise guide for us. It is only the one who appreciates God in this fashion who really has something to offer.

Prayer and Scripture

Listen to what he says about himself, continuing on now in verse 5. He has two things that he is going to speak of in his life. He talks about the way he values the word of God and about his prayer life. It's no accident that we find someone who is captivated by God to be a man or woman of scripture and someone whose prayer life is worth emulating. Listen to what Agur says about the word of God: "Every word of God is tested; he is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar." The word of God is tested; it has proved its worth over and over again. It has no failure or impurities in it, and so it becomes a shield for our lives. When the world is attacking us, undermining us, and frightening us, it becomes a place we can go for help.

His warning, therefore, is "Don't add to it. Don't dilute the truth by having the words and thinking of ordinary men placed on an equal plane with the word of God." I mentioned a few weeks ago the report by a committee of the Presbyterian Church, presented to their general assembly, that in effect said, "The Bible is good in its own way, but it's outdated." The modern world requires that to the wisdom of the Bible we add modern social thinking, psychological. In the modern world we need two voices, the word of scripture and the word of contemporary experts. But it's dangerous to add to the word of God. If it seems to lack the answers we need, it may very well be that we haven't seen deeply enough into it; perhaps we are only in the shallows. I don't think any of us would ever proclaim that we have grasped it all. But what we ought never to do is add to it as if we were God and could place our words alongside his words.

Agur shares with us a prayer as well: "Two things I asked of Thee, do not refuse me before I die; keep deception and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches...." He's serious about these requests. He wants God to answer them. He expands on the second of the two requests, telling us why he fears poverty and riches. He knows himself well enough to know that he couldn't handle riches if he were to get them. He fears that if he had them he would start ignoring God and depending on his wealth. He says, "If I am full, I may deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?'" There are some people who can handle great wealth and live lives free of idolatry and filled with the love of God, but Agur doesn't think he can handle it. Then he says, "If I'm too poor, in desperate want, I might be tempted to steal and profane the name of the Lord. So for my sake, Lord, please help me have just enough." There are other people who are assigned desperate poverty in life. They don't steal, and they don't profane the name of God; they live honorably as well. But Agur doesn't think he could handle that either, and so he asks for just enough.

Both of these requests are reminiscent of the Lord's prayer, aren't they? Remember when Jesus' disciples asked their master to teach them to pray, he said to begin with adoration of God, and then make requests of him. Two of the things they were to ask were, "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13), and, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). And Agur is praying, "Keep me from deception and lies, that is, from evil and temptation. And give me enough bread just for today, because that's the healthiest thing for me."

Deception and Lies

The prayer that he might avoid deception and lies is worth commenting on briefly. Deception suggests that he himself might be deceived. "Keep me from fooling myself, from living in a world of illusion. Help me face what is true and perhaps humbling or difficult. Don't let me deceive myself or be taken advantage of by others who would deceive me." And the second thing he asks is, "Keep me from telling lies. I don't want to be the kind of person who sows deception in the minds of others, who uses dishonesty to my advantage."

I chatted with Jerry and Alice Yan last week about a dilemma they found themselves in, trying to sell their

house and buy another. They had arranged to move out of their house yesterday, and escrow closed. The party who had bought it was going to move in. That same day they were supposed to be able to occupy their new home. But at the last moment they discovered that their loan broker had lied on their behalf in making the application, and they insisted on re-submitting a truthful document. The bank decided that until the matter was cleared up it wasn't going to give them the loan. And the owner of the house they were buying would not allow them access to his property until he had been paid.

The pressure on them was to go along with the lie-claiming to be U.S. citizens when they were not. They are permanent residents and in fact perfectly worthy candidates for the loan. And the bank, now that it has discovered what the issue is, is going to grant the loan. But it cost them a number of days of worry and inconvenience to take the same stand Agur did: "I don't want to lie, because in the long run, I'm dealing with things that are too important: my reputation, that of the Lord. Therefore don't let me be deceived, nor let me traffic in lies."

We're learning about a man who views himself primarily against the standard of a holy God. He has a large and magnificent God in his life, and he is therefore a free and humble man. Now listen to the description of his opposite-the arrogant and wicked man, in verses 10-14:

Do not slander a slave to his master,
Lest he curse you and you be found guilty.
There is a kind of man who curses his father,
And does not bless his mother.
There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes,
Yet is not washed from his filthiness.
There is a kind-oh how lofty are his eyes!
And his eyelids are raised in arrogance.
There is a kind of man whose teeth are like swords,
And his jaw teeth [fangs] like knives,
To devour the afflicted from the earth,
And the needy from among men.

The Arrogant Man

This is not a very pleasant person. Verse 14 describes him in graphically violent terms. For this man the entire world is filled with praise of himself. He is willing to take advantage of a weak person. If you slander a slave to his master, you've taken a defenseless victim and trashed him for no good reason. His rejection of parents suggests that the world originates with him. The arrogant man may even have a religious side to him, where he vaunts his goodness and purity, imagines himself to be sin-free, and has never seen his own filthiness, unrighteousness, and degradation. His eyes are lofty, his eyelids raised in arrogance. The entire world is a mirror to him. Everywhere he goes he sees himself. He bats his eyes at himself and is lofty in his own estimation.

Do you remember how Herod died in Acts 12? He was a similar kind of man. Acts 12:21-24 reads this way:

On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. And the people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

He was a man who created a public dais for himself, sat upon it and blathered on about nothing important at all, and had people arranged before him to praise his deity. He was lofty in his own estimation; he had nothing but himself to think about. His horrible end reminds us that there is only one God in the universe and we're not it, any of us. But the man being described by Agur has eyes only for himself, and this man in his

arrogance finally becomes violent and destructive. In the long run, arrogance leads to the tearing of the defenseless, the crushing of the poor, and the using of others.

I couldn't help but think of Saddam Hussein in reading these words, whose worship of self knows no limit. For him there is no end, apparently, to the number of people who must die or suffer, the extent to which the environment gets ruined, the amount of the economy that is destroyed. It doesn't seem to matter how much suffering anyone else must undergo in order for him to stay in the position of head of his country and lover of himself. Arrogance begets violence, as Agur observes. You couldn't have two more contrasting descriptions, could you: the oracle, the wise man who is aware of his own limits, versus the kind of man described in verses 10 through 14, who has no use for anyone but himself.

The Fascinating Creation

The second half of the chapter, as I've suggested, doesn't so much key off of seeing God and his magnificence, but is, rather, a wonderful tour of the created world. The suggestion here, it seems to me, is that if you are under no illusion about your need for God, if you can receive forgiveness for your failures, if you humbly worship a great God and have removed yourself from the center of things, then you are free enough to really enjoy the world God has made. You become fascinated with the difficulties and the abundance of the things God has made. Rather than drive by and never see, run over, pave over, or ignore the glories of creation, you can appreciate them. And so lessons about life are learned not only from the Creator but from the creation.

Let's read verses 15-33, and we'll hear the end of Agur's diary:

The leech [now there's an animal you can learn from right off the bat!] has two daughters,
"Give," "Give."

There are three things that will not be satisfied,
four that will not say, "Enough":
Sheol [the grave], and the barren womb,
Earth that is never satisfied with water,
And fire that never says, "Enough."
The eye that mocks a father,
And scorns a mother,
The ravens of the valley will pick it out,
And the young eagles will eat it.

There are three things which are too wonderful for me,
Four which I do not understand:
The way of an eagle in the sky,
The way of a serpent on a rock,
The way of a ship in the middle of the sea,
And the way of a man with a maid.
This is the way of an adulterous woman:
She eats and wipes her mouth,
And says, "I have done no wrong."
Under three things the earth quakes,
And under four, it cannot bear up:
Under a slave when he becomes king,
And a fool when he is satisfied with food,
Under an unloved woman when she gets a husband,
And a maidservant when she supplants her mistress.

Four things are small on the earth,
But they are exceedingly wise:

The ants are not a strong folk,
But they prepare their food in the summer;
The badgers [that's actually a Hebrew word that nobody knows how to translate; it's a mammal of some kind] are not mighty folk,
Yet they make their houses in the rocks;
The locusts have no king,
Yet all of them go out in ranks;
The lizard you may grasp with the hands,
Yet it is in kings' palaces.

There are three things which are stately in their march,
Even four which are stately when they walk:
The lion which is mighty among beasts
And does not retreat before any,
The strutting cock [again, that's a term that is difficult to translate; it is most likely, as here, a rooster], the male goat also,
And a king when his army is with him.

If you have been foolish in exalting yourself
Or if you have plotted evil, put your hand on your mouth.
For the churning of milk produces butter,
And pressing the nose brings forth blood;
So the churning of anger produces strife.

Now Agur is enough of an enthusiast about life that he will make observations based on nosebleeds and every other thing: little mammals in the rocks, eagles in the sky, and fires that don't burn out; everything interests him. Lessons about life and wisdom are gained from all these sources. It's characteristic, as you can tell in reading this passage, that things are listed in groups of three, then four. Often they are listed in order of increasing importance.

The word of God is tested; it has proved its worth over and over again

Ron Morris and his eleven-year-old son Ryan went fishing for five days last week, just two of them. They took off on mules and packed a long way into the middle of nowhere. Then they hiked even farther and came to an area that is very difficult to get to. The fish were abundant there, and they learned a lot about fish. Ron taught his son how to set the hook in the mouth of the fish instead of letting it swallow it and die, so that they could release the fish they caught. They caught so many they couldn't have ever conceivably eaten them all. They learned about weather, about mountains, and about altitude, what's different at ten or eleven thousand feet from other altitudes.

One of the comments Ron made to me about this trip was, "It was just me and my son, no one else for five days, and I really listened to him. Most of the time when we talk around the house, and we get part-way through a conversation and then my attention gets diverted. I never really hear everything he wants to say. But we were together long enough that every conversation got completed. It was an extraordinary learning experience, not only learning about fish and skies and birds and mountains, but learning about each other. We took time for it; there was opportunity, there was humility before God, and we made a choice to value each other." It was wonderful to hear the story.

Too Wonderful For Me

Agur is the same kind of man; he has the same kind of interest in things, the same willingness to let God teach him through the creation, the same freedom to give up self-promotion long enough to see some other things, make some observations, and pass them on. Let's look at just a couple of these paragraphs where he is teaching us based on experiences in nature.

Verse 18 talks about things that are absolutely wonderful, "too wonderful for me," he says, four of which he doesn't even understand. First, the way of an eagle in the sky: "How does it stay up there defying gravity? Everything else falls, but eagles don't fall, they fly. Wonderful! I don't quite understand it."

Then he goes on, "I don't understand snakes, either. There they are on a rock, and they have no legs. They can't grab anything, they have no hands, no suction cups. (They don't roll; you know, that might make sense.) How do they move? But you watch them, and they slither over the rocks. I don't understand it; it's too wonderful for me.

"And great big ships in the sea that are heavier than water. How do they find their way across the sea and without sinking or getting lost? There are storms and everything else, and they're out in the middle of nowhere."

And then the last thing, the most profound (these lists end at the highest point), is the way of a man with a maid, that is, a young man with a virgin. He is saying, "It's fascinating to me that every generation is able to solve that mystery. Young people find themselves attracted to each other, they make marriages together, and they learn about sex, communication, forgiveness and commitment. They have children who will also make these discoveries." Agur is anticipating Paul's observation that marriage is a great (and wonderful) mystery.

Then he throws in a sad contrast to it all. "This is the way of an adulterous woman: She eats and wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong.'" There is no mystery here. The relationship is between users. That is in great contrast to the mystery of a young man and a young woman falling in love with each other and establishing a life.

Agur is really interested in everything. He looks at life and learns from it. He sees the king with his army, and he see a strutting rooster, a stately lion, and a billy goat that can't be shaken from its intentions. You kind of wonder if he isn't tweaking the nose of the king a little bit. He is stately like a lion and cocky like a rooster at the same time, but only when his army is with him. Agur looks at barnyard animals and wild animals, and he learns something about kings by taking the time to pay attention.

Agur is a wise old man. He is someone who has had the wisdom and the freedom to worship an extraordinary God and to live in a beautiful, frightening, fascinating world. He is somebody who is worth emulating; his diary is worth reading. He is a man of scripture and a man of prayer. He understands the capacity of human beings to become violent, arrogant, and terrible, and yet he's chosen something else.

My wife Leslie and I took a walk yesterday out by the baylands. We talked about flowers, butterflies, and things that were happening. It was the end of a beautiful day, and the hills were clearly visible. It was delightful. And I realized how infrequently I do such things, how infrequently I take the time for a real appreciation of God and creation, how much I am consumed with thoughts of myself and my own affairs, and therefore how little freedom I have.

Stories of the Wise

Most long-lasting cultures have wise old men and wise old women, don't they? Think of Aesop's fables. They are primarily stories about animals that get themselves in predicaments and teach lessons to human beings. Perhaps you remember the stories of Uncle Remus in *Song of the South*, about Brer Fox, Brer Bear, and Brer Rabbit. It's a world of animals that displays truth about human beings. One of my favorite books is Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, how the camel got its hump, and how the elephant's child quit being a child anymore, grew a trunk, and gained stature and adulthood in life. And there is the story of Solomon and his wife and how by helping butterflies they taught a lesson to a great number of quarrelsome queens. These stories pass on the wisdom of old, thoughtful storytellers to make sense of life.

Our culture is in danger of losing this, it seems to me, because we don't venerate age enough, and nobody

slows down enough to learn anything. We're always worried about what's going to be outdated in a moment rather than what lasts forever. I think the wisdom of Agur is well worth attending to. The world is fascinating, God is great, and if we are able to see ourselves as we are, to receive forgiveness rather than promote ourselves, there is a great deal to be learned and joy to be experienced.

In closing, I would like us to consider the words of a great old hymn that very few of our contemporaries in this culture would be likely to write, *Fairest Lord Jesus*. It is about seeing the beauty of the Lord in his world.

Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son:
Thee will I cherish,
Thee will I honor,
Thou my soul's glory, joy, and crown.

Fair are the meadows,
Fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring:
Jesus is fairer,
Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing.

Fair is the sunshine,
Fairer still the moonlight,
And all the twinkling starry host:
Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer
Than all the angels heaven can boast.

Beautiful Savior!
Lord of the nations!
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor,
Praise, adoration,
Now and forevermore be thine!

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