

The Humility *of the* Wise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Proverbs 30, Luke 18:9–14, Job 38–40:2, 1 John 1:9, Rev. 3:14–18, Ps. 104:24.*

Memory Text: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (*Matthew 5:3, NKJV*).

In the Bible humility is considered an important virtue. The greatest of prophets, Moses, is singled out as the most humble person who ever lived (*Num. 12:3, NKJV*). According to Micah 6:8, the main duty that God expects from people is “to walk humbly with your God” (*NKJV*). Jesus, too, insists that humility is an ideal that the Christian should adopt: “Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (*Matt. 18:4, NKJV*).

After all, what does anyone have to boast about? Every breath, every heartbeat, every gift, every talent comes only from God, in whom “we live, and move, and have our being” (*Acts 17:28*). And in light of the cross, even all our righteousness is as “filthy rags” (*Isa. 64:6*); how, then, can we boast?

This week Proverbs looks at humility; considering our situation, how foolish is it to be anything but humble?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 21.

Who Do You Think You Are?

Read Proverbs 30:1–3, 32, 33. Together, what are they saying?

The self-negation seen in these texts is quite a break from the usual self-exaltation of kings in the ancient Near East, who often liked to boast of their wisdom, achievements, and military victories. Solomon himself is recorded as surpassing “all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom” (*1 Kings 10:23, NKJV; Eccles. 2:9*). And then, of course, there’s Nebuchadnezzar, who proclaimed: “ ‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’ ” (*Dan. 4:30, NIV*).

Because our author understands his own ignorance, he calls boasting “foolish.” The Hebrew word for “foolish” here is *nabal*, which is the name of Nabal, whose behavior exemplified foolish pride, as well (*1 Samuel 25*). Such boasting, which implies pride, also carries the potential for humiliation and, thus, for anger and strife. The apostle Paul also called some of his church members “fools” who considered themselves wise and were, even worse, boasting about it (*2 Cor. 11:18, 19*).

Read Luke 18:9–14. Why might it be easier to be like the Pharisee than one might think? How can we make sure that we don’t fall into this same trap even in the subtlest ways?

You have to feel sorry for people who boast (usually it’s a cover for insecurities, anyway); it shows just how self-deceived and foolish they really are.

A Knowledge of God?

Pride arises in those who don't know the Lord in a personal way. In contrast, the person who lives in communion with God will be humble, for he or she is constantly in touch with the One who is infinitely greater than any of us. When we think about the size of the universe and realize that we are worshiping the One who created that universe, and that this same God suffered in the person of Jesus on the cross for us, it's hard to imagine how we could struggle with pride while keeping these thoughts before us.

Read Proverbs 30:3–6. What do these verses tell us about the power, majesty, and mystery of God?

The expression “knowledge of God” is to be understood as meaning “knowledge about God.” Five rhetorical questions are then asked, which force us to recognize just how much about God we really don't understand.

Read those questions in Proverbs 30:4. What challenge do they present to us?

Because God is the Creator (the first four questions), He remains far beyond our understanding (the fifth question). In the book of Job, God challenges Job with the same questions so that Job would realize that he could not comprehend God or His ways (*Job 38–40:2*).

The fact that God is the Creator, and that we cannot fully understand Him, gives us a crucial lesson regarding how we should receive His written revelation, which scholars are always questioning. Who are we—whose understanding of even the simplest things in nature is clouded and full of mystery—to challenge the Word of God, even the parts that baffle or disturb us?

Dwell on the grandeur and mystery of the creation itself. What should these tell us about the grandeur and mystery of the Creator? Why should this grandeur and mystery give us comfort and hope?

Neither Too Much nor Too Little

Proverbs 30:7–9 contains the only prayer in the book of Proverbs. It is not by chance that this request immediately follows the affirmation of God as the great Creator (*Prov. 30:4*) and the promise of His faithfulness (*vs. 5*).

Read Proverbs 30:7–9. Why would someone ask these things?

Before we ask God for anything, it is important to make sure our relationship with Him is solid. If we lie, then we act as if God, who knows all things, doesn't even exist. This is why the confession of our sin is a prerequisite for forgiveness (*1 John 1:9*). We cannot cheat God; He sees us exactly as we are. As we pray, the dramatic gesture of prostration, lying in the dust like the dead (*Lam. 3:29*), reveals not only our reverence and humility but shows an awareness of our spiritual nakedness before Him.

In Proverbs 30:8, the writer asks God to “give” neither poverty nor riches. The first time that the verb “give” is used in the Bible in relation to humans, it deals with God's gift of food (*Gen. 1:29*). This is why in many cultures food is traditionally associated with prayer. This basic need, which makes us so dependent on the God of Creation, places the experience of prayer at the core of our survival.

The two requests do not aim just at the balance of human character. They converge in one goal: the glory of God. If we get too little, we tend to steal and insult God; if we get too much, we do not feel the need for God and may even deny His existence. It is noteworthy, however, that only the latter predicament can lead to a disconnect from God; the former will likely keep us in touch with Him.

The Lord's Prayer carries the same twofold concern: (1) “Give us this day our daily bread” (*Matt. 6:11*) provides for our needs and not more; and (2) “Do not lead us into temptation” (*vs. 13, NKJV*) takes care of our needs.

Think about just how dependent you are on God. How can keeping that stark fact ever in your mind help you grow in faith? What dangers come when we forget this dependence?

The Actions of the Arrogant

Just as humility is positive and brings blessings, a lack of humility is dangerous and brings curses. After having encouraged the virtue of humility by showing its rewards and fruit, Proverbs 30 gives a stern warning about the dangers that come from pride.

Cursing your parents (Prov. 30:11, 17). Agur begins with this category, for it represents the most serious act of arrogance, when children despise their source of life. Significantly, honoring and blessing one's parents is the only commandment associated with the promise of life (*Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2, 3*), while the death penalty is prescribed for its transgression (*Exod. 21:15, 17*).

Self-righteousness (Prov. 30:12, 20). The condition of sinners who think of themselves as righteous is bad, because they will stay in their sin, believing that they are pure and don't need forgiveness. This is why the confession of sin is so fundamental to obtaining forgiveness (*1 John 1:9*). The Laodiceans, who claim that they are rich, intelligent, and well dressed (though unaware that they are poor, blind, and naked), are counseled to acquire from God the means to repair their miserable condition (*Rev. 3:14–18*).

“Here is represented a people who pride themselves in their possession of spiritual knowledge and advantages. But they have not responded to the unmerited blessings that God has bestowed upon them. They have been full of rebellion, ingratitude, and forgetfulness of God; and still He has dealt with them as a loving, forgiving father deals with an ungrateful, wayward son. They have resisted His grace, abused His privileges, slighted His opportunities, and have been satisfied to sink down in contentment, in lamentable ingratitude, hollow formalism, and hypocritical insincerity.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 83.

Contempt (Prov. 30:13, 14). The picture presented of the arrogant is not pretty. Though they have a proud look on their face, the arrogance doesn't remain just there: it is manifested in the contempt they reveal to those who they feel are below them. The imagery of the “fangs” and “teeth” (*vs. 14, NKJV*) show just how bad their actions are.

Think about how you have treated others, particularly those to whom you might even feel superior (most of us have those feelings at times, do we not?). How can you make it right? How can you display the *humility* needed to make it right?

Lessons From Nature

All through the Bible, imagery from nature has been used to teach spiritual truths. Here, too, using nature, the proverb teaches us lessons about humility.

Read Proverbs 30:18, 19. What is it saying here, too, about the limits of human understanding?

Agur sees mystery in even many of the “common” things. It is a very fascinating mix of mysteries that he presents here. The first two are from animals: an eagle silently moving through the sky, a snake silently moving along the earth. He then shifts to two human actions: a ship on the sea and a man with a woman. Even today, with all our scientific knowledge, so many mysteries remain. How crucial it is that we never lose our appreciation for the depth and majesty of life. That attitude will surely help keep us humble before God.

Read Proverbs 30:24–28. What other mysteries from nature catch the author’s attention and awe?

It’s interesting that the immediately preceding verses (*Prov. 30:20–23*) deal with human folly, arrogance, and vice. He then shifts to the animal world, pointing to small and humble creatures, even though he uses the same Hebrew word for “wise” in reference to them that is used in reference to humans (*Prov. 3:13*) and even God Himself (*Job 12:13, Ps. 104:24*). Even today, with all our advances in science, how these creatures do what they do remains beyond our full comprehension. How much more so their actions must have baffled this wise man in his time. And he was indeed wise, because one of the great signs of wisdom is to acknowledge just how little we know, even about the commonest things.

Think about some of the “simplest” things in nature: the leaf of a tree, a drop of water, a seashell. How should the fact that even these things are full of mysteries keep us humble?

Further Study: “We should reverence God’s word. For the printed volume we should show respect, never putting it to common uses, or handling it carelessly. And never should Scripture be quoted in a jest, or paraphrased to point a witty saying. ‘Every word of God is pure’; ‘as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.’ Proverbs 30:5; Psalm 12:6.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 244.

“Christ’s first words to the people on the mount were words of blessing. Happy are they, He said, who recognize their spiritual poverty, and feel their need of redemption. The gospel is to be preached to the poor. Not to the spiritually proud, those who claim to be rich and in need of nothing, is it revealed, but to those who are humble and contrite. . . . The Lord can do nothing toward the recovery of man until, convinced of his own weakness, and stripped of all self-sufficiency, he yields himself to the control of God. Then he can receive the gift that God is waiting to bestow. From the soul that feels his need, nothing is withheld. He has unrestricted access to Him in whom all fullness dwells.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 299, 300.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell on the plan of salvation and what was required to save us. That is, we are so fallen, so corrupt, so evil, that mere regeneration would not be enough to redeem us from sin. No matter how much we are changed and restored, that regeneration and restoration cannot save us. We need a substitute, someone who legally stands in our place and whose righteousness alone is enough to make us right with God. What should this reality itself tell us about why arrogance and pride have to be some of the worst sins in fallen beings like us?
- 2 What are some of the different ways that our very existence depends upon God? What are the things in nature itself that show us how God sustains our existence?
- 3 Dwell more on the prayer in Proverbs 30:7–9. Look at the balance there. How do we find balance in all that we do? Why is this so important?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 30*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Learn to treasure highly the divine Source of wisdom found in the Creator Himself—and to appreciate that this comprehensive divine wisdom provides valuable instruction for success in the present life.

Feel: Desire to study the ways of God in nature and to find His blessing there and feel motivated to apply God’s practical counsel for successful daily living.

Do: Pray for the wisdom and power of God to live within the blueprint of His Word, proving “what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (*Rom. 12:2*), rather than conforming to secular culture’s assumptions.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Valuable Resource to Be Found in God’s Created World

- Ⓐ How can the study of nature teach us about the character of the Creator?
- Ⓑ With sin having distorted much of the goodness of the original Creation, how can we rightly interpret what we now see there?

II. Feel: The Importance of Interpreting Nature Through Scripture

- Ⓐ Though Solomon and Agur (penmen of much of the book of Proverbs) also lived in a sinful world, how were they able to still believe in the goodness of the Creator and not be deterred by the corruption in the world?
- Ⓑ How does the pervasive theory of evolution devalue animals and nature?

III. Do: Communing With Nature’s Creator: A Blessing of the Sabbath

- Ⓐ How can the Sabbath help us to learn about the goodness of Creation?
- Ⓑ How can belief in the literal Creation of this world (*Genesis 1, 2*) guard against false interpretations of our origins?

► **Summary:** Proverbs 30 presents a way of life grounded in the Creator’s blueprint, including the resultant blessings, reminding us that fellowship with the Creator is the best life, even before heaven.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Proverbs 30:1–6*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: We can trust fully in the reliability and truthfulness of God’s revealed Word.

Just for Teachers: Proverbs 30 instructs that moral ambiguity and relativism ultimately do not work. The boundaries of right and wrong, good and evil, true and false cannot be erased no matter how determinedly postmodern society tries. Tolerance of evil and moral indifference are neither virtues nor adequate responses, according to the book of Proverbs.

Opening Activity: Have your class consider how many serious problems of modern society can be linked to the disregard of God’s precepts. What difference would it make in society if all spouses were faithful to each other and there was no adultery? What difference would it make if there were no thieves, if everyone was always honest at home and work?

Consider This: The book of Proverbs does not simply attach the knowledge of God to other secular systems of wisdom. On the contrary, the precepts of God dominate biblical wisdom, the true source of wisdom and understanding and the standard by which everything else is judged. Moreover, a personal relationship with God is the remedy for human ignorance. Why is it so hard for the human heart and mind to admit ignorance?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Chapter 30 opens with Agur’s confessing that on his own he cannot find wisdom (vs. 2, 3); then, with rhetorical questions, it instructs that God alone possesses wisdom (vs. 4) and that He willingly shares it through His Word (vs. 5). Finally, Proverbs warns that God’s Word is not to be tampered with: “Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar” (vs. 6, *NKJV*), a sentiment given by other biblical writers (Moses and John).

Bible Commentary

I. Knowledge of God (*Review Proverbs 30:3–6 with your class.*)

The biblical teaching of a literal Creation grounds the wisdom literature. God Himself, in His longest speech in the Bible (*to Job, in Job 38–41*), joyfully refers to creating this world.

Believing the biblical description of Creation, upheld all through Scripture, informs and broadens human perspectives of God’s character and work. “The Bible does not say God is forgiveness, even though he is forgiving; or that God is knowledge, even though he is all-knowing; or that God is power, even though he is all-powerful. All other attributes are, like facets on a diamond, radiant windows into the heart of God.”—Timothy R. Jennings, M.D., *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2013), p. 22.

According to Agur and all Bible writers, true knowledge comes from joyful submission to the Maker of heaven and earth, because He is worthy. Human ignorance of God and His creative power leads to opposing Him, as Solomon notes: “ ‘Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes’ ” (*Eccles. 7:29, NKJV*). Because of human sin, creation only partially reveals the divine order anymore. Moreover, human understanding has become degraded because of sin and thus is not sufficient to fully understand all of reality.

Consider This: What human presumptions undergird much of the false thinking about God’s character and work? What does the Bible say is the prerequisite condition or attitude for receiving true knowledge?

II. The Arrogant (*Review Proverbs 30:10–31 with your class.*)

Proverbs 30:10–31 lists behaviors that pervert the social order. Even worse, such behavior resists divine perspectives (speaking of human assumptions, not mental abilities). There is less and less reverence for God’s truth. The book of Proverbs describes this as preferring to live with illusions, adopting sinful perspectives as the moral standard—reminding us that the problems of society result not from mental deficiency but from spiritual pride.

In Proverbs, people who do this are dubbed “simple” or “fools” and are described as gullible, irresponsible, empty-headed, inexperienced, drifting into temptation, and as not accepting discipline, rebuke, or correction.

Consider This: The first principle of wisdom in Proverbs is the fear of the Lord. This is not just one aspect of learning but the place from which the search for wisdom must begin. Such a decision will determine any growth in wisdom, including the moral dimension. All biblical writers work with this same assumption. How can a person be certain that this first principle is true? Given the nature of the first principle, what, then, is the first step a person needs to take in searching for wisdom?

III. Lessons From Nature (Review Proverbs 30:18, 19, 24–31 with your class.)

According to Proverbs, one of the best ways to learn about God and His ways is through the created world that He made. Though many people think about animals only in terms of how they taste, this week’s lesson, along with many other verses in Proverbs, instructs us that animals can be our teachers: “Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise” (*Prov. 6:6, NKJV*), followed with a description of their diligence.

So much is being learned now about the wonders of all life, including the intelligence of animals. For example, if anyone wonders why God “commanded the ravens” to feed Elijah (*1 Kings 17:4*), the book *Crows: Wise Guys of the Avian World*, by Candace Savage (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Greystone Books, 2005), is illuminating. Reconnection with the lives of animals could be valuable in softening our hearts, for animals have feelings and affection, which Ellen G. White noted: “The intelligence displayed by many dumb animals approaches so closely to human intelligence that it is a mystery. The animals see and hear and love and fear and suffer. They use their organs far more faithfully than many human beings use theirs. They manifest sympathy and tenderness toward their companions in suffering. Many animals show an affection for those who have charge of them, far superior to the affection shown by some of the human race. They form attachments for man which are not broken without great suffering to them.

“What man with a human heart, who has ever cared for domestic animals, could look into their eyes, so full of confidence and affection, and willingly give them over to the butcher’s knife? How could he devour their flesh as a sweet morsel?”—*The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 315, 316. After all, humans and animals are made from the “same stuff” (*Gen. 2:7, 19*).

Jesus Himself treasured the things His own hands had made: “ ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these’ ” (*Matt. 6:28, 29, NKJV*). Ellen G. White also turns our attention to the wonders of the natural world: “As we come close to the heart of nature, Christ makes His presence real to us, and speaks to our hearts of His peace and love.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 26.

An educational psychologist argues that if children spent more time in the restorative powers of nature than being unnaturally stimulated by electronic technology, there would be less trouble and rebellion in the school system (see Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* [Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008]).

Consider This: The more we understand about the natural world—plants, animals, the composition of water and its exact fitness for life (let alone necessity for life), the air we breathe, our precise distance from the sun necessary for life, and so on—the more our wonder for the Creator abounds. His control of

time (creating the first seven days of Creation and then bending them into the first week) also gives evidence of His power and love. What, though, has caused humans to become so estranged from animals and nature?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: If we are ever to know wisdom, we must be taught by God, who alone possesses true knowledge. This attitude, underlying the entire book of Proverbs, rebuts the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which contended that unaided, human wisdom could attain truth. This thinking has proved to be a colossal failure. Yes, the medieval church has a bloody record, but modern atheism is even more brutal. Unfortunately, however, the failure of the Enlightenment attitude has led to a perverse postmodern conclusion—that there are no absolutes (except that!). The book of Proverbs insists on an alternative perspective: the reliability and truth of God’s revealed Word.

Thought Question:

① What evidence from the book of Proverbs reminds us that although the world is now sinful, God is not aloof, distant, cold, and forbidding but, rather, intimate, personal, warm, and affirming?

Application Questions:

- ① What are some of the reasons we have been so slow to appreciate the wonders of nature and thus nature’s Creator?
- ② Explore reasons that evolutionary theory has demeaned the value of nature.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Solomon, like his father David, was impressed with the created world. Find several psalms wherein David exalts the Creator by praising Him for His created works (*for example, Pss. 19, 33, 104*). Ask the class to share how some of their experiences in nature have drawn them closer to the Creator.

Activity: Bring to the class current articles and books on different animals that reveal their intelligence, affection, and hard work. Or share instances from your own interactions with, or observations of, animals that reveal their intelligence, affection, and hard work. A number of Web sites also post videos of birds flying in slow motion, capturing the magnificence of their flight and tail feathers in action, which our sin-dimmed eyes presently see only as simple flapping.