

# The Humility of the Wise



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## 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?

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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?

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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?

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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?

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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?

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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?**

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## 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?**

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## 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?

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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?

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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?

## Thrice Saved

At the age of four, Jesse lost his mother. By the time he was nine, Jesse lived in foster homes. As a teen, he met a young man who played basketball. When Jesse shared his name, the young man looked surprised. “Your mother and my father were brother and sister!”

Taking Jesse home, the cousin introduced him to the rest of the family. That’s when Jesse learned that his mother had died of complications caused by his father’s beatings.

Jesse moved in with his uncle; and as his anger over his circumstances simmered, he joined the U.S. Air National Guard then switched to the U.S. Marines. He married, had three children, but later divorced. “I felt hurt and empty inside,” he recalled. “Once more I had no family and felt completely alone.”

Feeling life wasn’t worth living, Jesse took his rifle and ammunition down to the beach with plans to end his life. Wading into the sea, he sat down on a rock. Soon a police officer came, but Jesse raised his rifle, warning him to stay away. Then the colonel from the Marine base arrived, ordering him to put the gun down. Jesse refused. But when he saw his father approaching, Jesse put the gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger. There was an explosion and he fell backward—still alive. The bullet had jammed halfway through the barrel.

Jesse was discharged from the Marines and tried again to commit suicide. This time he ended up in the hospital emergency room where he met Dr. Nozaki, a Seventh-day Adventist physician determined to save him. When he awoke after surgery, Jesse found a Bible by his bed, placed there by Dr. Nozaki. He hid the Bible, but each day he found another one.

When Jesse was released from the hospital, Dr. Nozaki urged him to read the book of John. Finally, Jesse agreed. The doctor called him each day, making sure that he had food and clothing. In time, Jesse realized that Dr. Nozaki really cared, and he learned to trust him. He started Bible studies, and the doctor invited him to church.

One day Jesse returned to the rock where he had tried to kill himself and thanked God for saving his life. He continued studying and was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “For the first time in my life,” he said, “I felt peace.”

Later, with the doctor’s encouragement, Jesse and his wife reconciled. They remarried in Dr. Nozaki’s home.