

It takes but a small amount of humility and knowledge to recognize when you're witnessing someone who possesses great skill. Over the last few weeks, watching the World Cup of Soccer, I have witnessed skill that far exceeds my own. The speed, the foot skills, the vision, the creativity has been a joy to watch. At the same time I have been watching the tennis being played at Wimbledon and our two Canadians: Genie Bouchard and Milos Raonic. The power, the focus, the athleticism, the balance—the skill level is incredible.

Have you ever watched a master musician play a brilliant piece of music? Have you seen an artist fill a canvas with brush strokes, or, witness a designer transform a room into a thing of beauty?

Last Summer my family spent a few days in Hong Kong, and my father-in-law brought us downtown to look at some of the buildings that had been constructed. There was an artistry at work, both in the architectural design, and, among the artisans who physically constructed the building—I saw the evidence of great skill all around me.

But I wonder about these athletes, artists, and designers...though their skill is great in select areas, do they also possess what they need to live skillfully in this world? Do we know how to live skillfully?

In Proverbs 4 we read, "*Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding...When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble. Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.*"<sup>1</sup> Not everyone who possesses great skill also possesses wisdom.

But what does it mean to be wise? If we were to ask this question out on the street, we would hear many different answers. It depends who you ask and what they value. Some would suggest that wisdom is tied to education—the smarter you are, the wiser you are. Others would suggest that wisdom is tied to the achievement of specific goals, for example, a successful career and a healthy bank account.

The problem with both of these answers is that we've all met really smart or successful "dumb" people. Gary Larson forever memorialized this reality with a brilliant Far Side Comic—*Midvale School For The "Gifted."* Being "book smart" doesn't make one "street smart". Someone may have a high IQ (Intelligence Quotient) but a low EQ (Emotional Quotient)—such a person isn't self aware or other aware, and they struggle in relating to anyone.

We might say that in addition to IQ and EQ, the Bible speaks about GQ—the Godliness Quotient. Biblically speaking, wisdom is the ability to make choices that honour God. Over the Summer months, we are going to plant ourselves in the Book of Proverbs, and look for the wisdom we need in order to live skillfully in God's world.

Living skillfully—this is what Biblical wisdom is all about. Biblical wisdom isn't abstract, esoteric, or theoretical—there is a grittiness about it because it's meant to be lived. Biblically speaking, one can be extremely intelligent and still be a "fool." The fool is the one who lives with selfishness and indulgence, acknowledging no higher authority than oneself.

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<sup>1</sup> Prov. 4:7, 12-13.

One author writes, “The very first step, then, in biblical wisdom is knowing God—not abstractly or theoretically, but in the concrete sense of committing your life to him... Wisdom, therefore, as the Bible defines it, has nothing to do with IQ... It is a matter of orientation to God.”<sup>2</sup>

In a few minutes we are going to sink our teeth into Proverbs 30:1-6, but first a question, followed by a story.

“Would you buy a house if you were only allowed to see one of its rooms? Would you purchase a car if you were permitted to see only its tires and a taillight? Would you pass judgment on a book after reading only one paragraph? Nor would I.

Good judgment requires a broad picture. Not only is that true in purchasing houses, cars, and books, it’s true in evaluating life. One failure doesn’t make a person a failure; one achievement doesn’t make a person a success... Here is the woodcutter’s story.

Once there was an old man who lived in a tiny village. Although poor, he was envied by all, for he owned a beautiful white horse. Even the king coveted his treasure. A horse like this had never been seen before—such was its splendour, its majesty, its strength. People offered fabulous prices for the steed, but the old man always refused. “This horse is not a horse to me,” he would tell them... He is a friend, not a possession. How could you sell a friend?”

One morning he found that the horse was not in the stable. All the village came to see him. “*You old fool,*” they scoffed, “*we told you*

*that someone would steal your horse. We warned you that you would be robbed. You are so poor. How could you ever hope to protect such a valuable animal? It would have been better to have sold him. You could have gotten whatever price you wanted. No amount would have been too high. Now the horse is gone, and you’ve been cursed with misfortune.*”

The old man responded, “**Don’t speak too quickly. Say only that the horse is not in the stable. That is all we know; the rest is judgment. If I’ve been cursed or not, how can you know? How can you judge?**”

The people contested, “*Don’t make us out to be fools! We may not be philosophers, but great philosophy is not needed. The simple fact that your horse is gone is a curse.*” The old man spoke again. “**All I know is that the stable is empty, and the horse is gone. The rest I don’t know. Whether it be a curse or a blessing, I can’t say. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?**”

The people of the village laughed. They thought that the man was crazy. They had always thought he was fool; if he wasn’t, he would have sold the horse and lived off the money. But instead, he was a poor woodcutter, an old man still cutting firewood and dragging it out of the forest and selling it. He lived hand to mouth in the misery of poverty. Now he had proven that he was, indeed, a fool.

After fifteen days, the horse returned. He hadn’t been stolen; he had run away into the forest. Not only had he returned, he had brought a dozen wild horses with him. Once again the village people gathered around the woodcutter and spoke. “*Old man, you were right and we*

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<sup>2</sup> Gorgon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 228.

*were wrong. What we thought was a curse was a blessing. Please forgive us.”*

The man responded, “Once again, you go too far. Say only that the horse is back. State only that a dozen horses returned with him, but don’t judge. How do you know if this is a blessing or not? You see only a fragment. Unless you know the whole story, how can you judge? You read only one page of a book... Life is so vast, yet you judge all of life with one page or one word. All you have is a fragment! Don’t say that this is a blessing. No one knows. I am content with what I know. I am not perturbed by what I don’t.”

“*Maybe the old man is right,*” they said to one another. So they said little. But down deep, they knew he was wrong. They knew it was a blessing. Twelve wild horses had returned with one horse. With a little bit of work, the animals could be broken and trained and sold for much money.

The old man had a son, an only son. The young man began to break the wild horses. After a few days, he fell from one of the horses and broke both legs. Once again the villagers gathered around the old man and cast their judgments. “*You were right,*” they said. “*You proved you were right. The dozen horses were not a blessing. They were a curse. Your only son has broken his legs, and now in your old age you have no one to help you. Now you are poorer than ever.*”

The old man spoke again. “*You people are obsessed with judging. Don’t go so far. Say only that my son broke his legs. Who knows if it*

*is a blessing or a curse? No one knows. We only have a fragment. Life comes in fragments.*”

It so happened that a few weeks later the country engaged in war against a neighbouring country. All the young men of the village were required to join the army. Only the son of the old man was excluded, because he was injured. Once again the people gathered around the old man, crying and screaming because their sons had been taken. There was little chance that they would return. The enemy was strong, and the war would be a losing struggle. They would never see their sons again.

“*You were right, old man,*” they wept. “*God knows you were right. This proves it. Yours son’s accident was a blessing. His legs may be broken, but at least he is with you. Our sons are gone forever.*” The old man spoke again. “*It is impossible to talk with you. You always draw conclusions. No one knows. Say only this: Your sons had to go to war, and mine did not. No one knows if it is a blessing or a curse. No one is wise enough to know. Only God knows.*”

The old man was right. We only have a fragment. Life’s [happenings] and horrors are only [one] page out of a grand book. We must be slow about drawing conclusions. We must reserve judgment... [because only God knows the whole story].”<sup>3</sup>

I offer this story as a preface to the Big Idea of my entire sermon: **human wisdom is limited; we need God; we need God to speak.** There is much that we cannot see. There is much we do not understand. We need God’s wisdom in order to live skillfully in His

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<sup>3</sup> I came across this story, retold by Max Lucado: <http://maxlucado.com/read/topical/woodcutters-wisdom-and-other-favorite-stories/>

world. This truth is woven throughout the Book of Proverbs and I would like to invite you to ponder this truth as we turn our attention Proverbs 30:1-6. **Read.**

*“The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance. This man’s utterance to Ithiel: ‘I am weary, God, but I can prevail. 2 Surely I am only a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding. 3 I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One. 4 Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know! 5 ‘Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.’ 6 Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.”*

Agur is weary, worn out, burned out from independently seeking wisdom. The reason he has hope to prevail is because he is convinced that God has spoken and will continue to speak and reveal what is needed for skillful living. Vs. 1 begins with a claim to inspired utterance—what Agur now offers to Ithiel, to Israel, and to us is a prophetic word, a word from God that reveals and directs.

Agur reveals that he is wise by recognizing the limits of human wisdom. Vs. 2: *“surely I am a brute, a beast, I have so little wisdom and understanding that I am barely human.”* This is classic, semitic, hyperbole—exaggeration for effect. Have you ever been in a similar situation, where you have felt the gap between the limited wisdom you possess and the wisdom required by the situation? *“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to manoeuvre*

*through the tangled mess that I’m in.”* We can all relate to Agur’s experience—we all stand where he stood. He continues in verse 3.

The reason for Agur’s stated lack of wisdom is that he cannot get to God on his own. In order to have knowledge of God, God must speak—God must reveal Himself to His creatures. We have been made in God’s image but God is transcendent and we are not. This is what Agur is highlighting when He refers to God as the “Holy One”—God is higher, greater, and completely “other”.

Agur is pressing the point that in order to be truly human, instead of a beast with darkened understanding, to possess true wisdom—one must know God. One cannot live skillfully in God’s world without knowing God. And this knowledge he speaks of—“knowledge of the Holy One”—is the personal knowledge born of relationship.

Biblical wisdom is not about stock piling information about God. It’s not about memorizing the Bible. It’s about committing your life and your decisions to Him.

Agur’s confession flies in the face of both Enlightenment and Post Modern philosophy. Enlightenment rationalism said, *“We don’t need God to discover truth, in fact, belief in God gets in the way of truth.”* Rationalism declared that through the exclusive exercise of human reason and intelligence, we can know all there is to know; we can discover the secrets of the universe and make the world a better place.

It strikes me that there is partial truth to this assertion. Quite apart from a commitment to God, humanity has discovered many mysteries—one doesn’t need to be committed to the Scriptures in

order to understand economic theory, split the atom, or find a cure for cancer. But then, the unravelling of scientific or medical mysteries doesn't make us any more capable to live skillfully in our world. History reminds us that scientific discovery can be used to any end—didn't chemical warfare and the nuclear bomb stem from brilliant discoveries in science?

Two World Wars, a Great Depression, the Holocaust, and the horrors under Stalin and Chairman Mao, did much to tarnish the belief in unaided human reason. But in response to Enlightenment naiveté, Post Moderns have made a colossal error in the opposite direction. Post Moderns have concluded that there are no absolutes, no capital "T" truth—we cannot be sure of anything.

This hermeneutic of suspicion has permeated our culture today and many people find themselves paralyzed. If there is no "Truth," and we can't be sure of anything, we end up living with fear in the face of decisions. Post Moderns long for someone to tell them what to do, where to go, and how to live, yet they are suspicious of anyone who offers such direction.<sup>4</sup>

Agur clearly doesn't have the same hang ups. If vs. 2 presents humanity's inability to independently find wisdom, vs. 3 offers the anti-dote to human ignorance—we need divine revelation; we need God to speak.

Let's take a look at verse 4. Agur offers a series of rhetorical questions, five in all, to which His readers already knew the answers:

Q. 1: "*Who has gone up to heaven and come down?*" The implied answer was, "no one." Allow me to translate what Agur is saying so that we can arrive at his meaning. Agur is asking, "*Do you have the benefit of seeing and knowing all that heaven sees and knows? Were any of you there at the beginning? Were you there when God laid the foundation of the earth? Did you see how God put it together? Do you know why He put it together the way He did?*"

The point he is making is that life is so complex, with all of its related parts, that we cannot make sense of life apart from God. Bruce Waltke writes, "Unless you can see the whole, and how it's all put together, you can never be sure of anything particular within it, of what's right and wrong—you have to see it totally."<sup>5</sup>

The plain fact is that we are incapable of this kind of sight, knowledge, and wisdom—apart from God, we lack what we need to live skillfully. Waltke continues, "Unless we see the whole, we really don't know right from wrong. Unless you see it totally, you may call promiscuity good—as some do—and you may call monogamy bad—as some do."<sup>6</sup> But unless you see something comprehensively, as God does, how can you judge the part when you don't understand the whole? We need God to speak to know how to live.

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book Of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31*, 468-469.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Agur continues with a second and third question. “*Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?*” The One who can hold the winds in His fist, is the One who controls the rain that sustains life. The One who wraps up the waters in a cloak is the One who controls the storm clouds.

Agur’s fourth and fifth questions follow suit, “*Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know!*” Who was there from the very beginning? Who put it all together? Who holds the wind in His fists and the storm clouds in His cloak? Who established the ends of the earth? What is His name?

His name is Yahweh, the Lord of Heaven and Earth—all of Israel knew the answer. And what is the name of His son? Israel knew this answer too—Yahweh had named the nation of Israel as His first born son. Israel was not in the dark when it came to God—He had spoken and revealed Himself; He had given them wisdom and instruction for living skillfully.

Agur asks, “*Who has gone up to heaven and come down?*” When we get to the New Testament, Agur’s question is answered in a way he could not have anticipated. God the Son—who was with the Father and the Spirit in the beginning, when creation was put together—did in fact come from Heaven to Earth. He became one of us, He became human in every way. John 1:18 says, “*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.*”

Who can we trust? Who can we follow? We can trust the One who was there at the very beginning, the One who was there when all of creation was put together—the One who shares our humanity and who died to reconcile us to God. Jesus is worthy of trust. Jesus possesses the wisdom we need to live skillfully in God’s world. Jesus, and Jesus alone is worth following.

Verses 5 and 6 nicely sum up Agur’s entire argument. There is a ceiling to humanity’s knowledge and wisdom, but (vs. 5) “*Every word of God is flawless*”. He sees. He knows. And while we are more likely to trust ourselves than God, Agur has been making the case that our wisdom is much more likely to be found wanting/false than God’s wisdom.

**Conclusion:** so where do Agur’s words leave us? We must decide for ourselves. His call to wisdom begins with admitting the limits of human wisdom. In order to embrace God’s wisdom, we must renounce self-sufficiency and pride in order to embrace humble dependence.

C.S. Lewis writes, “In God [we] come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to [ourselves]. Unless [we] know God as that—and, therefore, know [ourselves] as nothing in comparison— [we] do not know God at all. As long as [we] are proud [we] cannot know God. A proud [person] is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as [we] are looking down, [we] cannot see something that is above [us].”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Chapt. 8, “The Great Sin (Pride)”.

We need God. We need Him for the lives we are living and the decisions we are making. We weren't there in the beginning, we didn't see how God put everything together. And what we do see and perceive is limited in scope and limited by our weaknesses, biases, and agendas. The fear and worry each of us experience in decision-making should alert us to the reality that there is much that we don't see, know, or control. We need God to speak, to lead, and to guide.

At the centre of biblical wisdom is the desire to know and follow God. The desire for skillful living is a holy desire, born of God. This Summer, we want to invite you to commit your life, and your decision-making to God—entrust yourself to His wisdom for skillful living.

And if you are looking for direction in your Scripture reading these days, let me encourage you to read through the Book of Proverbs this Summer—you will encounter God's wisdom when it comes to our relationships, our work, our words, and many other aspects of life.

At this time I'd like to invite Jim to come and lead us in a final song. As Jim comes, allow me to pray.

**Pray**

**Benediction**