

Give Me Neither Proverbs 30:1-9

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Well, good morning. It's good to be with all of you this morning. If we haven't met, I'm Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King. And since Penny is away, it's my privilege to get open God's Word with us this morning. If you've been with us recently, you know we're in the middle of a summer series on the book of Proverbs. And we've been taking up the topics it addresses one at a time. And so a couple of weeks ago, we looked at envy. And last week, Penny brought us face to face with anger. And this morning, we're going to turn our attention to wealth. Now, going one at a time like this is a bit artificial. I mean, in real life, things like envy and anger and money, they don't tend to stay to themselves. They tend to travel in packs. We know this. Proverbs knows this too. And that's why it rarely treats them in isolation. And yet, pulling them apart and taking a hard look at each one on its own, lets you see it clearly. Clearly enough to actually recognize it in your own life. So there's good in what we're doing. We're going to range across Proverbs this morning, but I want to anchor us in one passage, Proverbs chapter 30, verses 1-9, because it speaks straight to the temptations wealth lays before us. So let's read that together. Proverbs 30:1-9:

“The words of Agur son of Jakeh. The oracle.
The man declares, I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out.
Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I have not the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is his son's name? Surely you know!
Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.
Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Gracious and mighty God, we come to you today expectant. We trust that you will speak to us through your word. Your word is truth. Your word is life. So we ask Lord today that you will open our hearts, open our minds and our ears to receive your truth that you have for us through this proverb. Father, by your spirit, give us insight. We ask Lord that you will, through the hearing of your word, continue to shape us into the people you want us and have designed us to be. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

So the topic of wealth is, I think, a peculiar one to address right after looking at envy and anger. And that's because of the three, it's the one we're least likely as Americans to call a problem. Just think about it for a moment. We hide our envy. We excuse our angry outbursts

precisely because we know them to be wrong. But wealth is different. It's a desire we're allowed to have. We're allowed to admit to. We want it openly and rarely does anyone think the worst of us for it. And in a sense, I think this is the way it should be. After all, the desire to provide and to build and to give an inheritance is good. And yet, that's just what makes wealth so hard to watch. Our desire for it is half right. And the half that's right tends to keep us from seeing the half that isn't. And because that blind spot is so hard to see in ourselves, when we try to picture wealth gone wrong, not the good but the bad, our minds tend to latch onto something safely far away. Like a headline about the uber wealthy we feel quietly virtuous for not being.

Recently the world watched a single human being cross a threshold no one ever crossed before. The first person to be worth a trillion dollars. I admit, there's satisfaction in shaking my head at a number like that. Or our minds reach for the old caricatures of greed. Scrooge, King Midas, their insatiable thirst for gold. These figures are so extravagant, cartoonish even, in their pursuit of wealth that they're almost a comfort. We get to watch them from across the room. We look at them the way we look at a painting rather than the way we look into a mirror. And that's the trouble. None of them shows us our own face. And so this morning I don't want to show you a cartoon, I want to introduce you to a real person. Not one whose greed we can watch from a safe distance, but one who saw the danger coming for himself and did something about it. His name was Augur. The heading at the top of chapter 30 tells us simply the words of Augur, son of Jaka, the oracle. That's it. That's all we get. There's no royal title, there's no office or tribe. He doesn't show up anywhere else in the Bible. Just Augur, son of Jaka. He's a one chapter figure and then he vanishes. And this is strange, especially when you think about where he shows up. I mean, you read Proverbs from the beginning and you spend 29 chapters with Solomon. You've sat at Lady Wisdom's table course after course and by chapter 30 you might expect to meet the finished product. But instead, this nobody walks in, this gadfly, and serves what Christopher Ansbury calls "a bitter dessert." And this is the bitter dessert. He hasn't arrived. He says it himself. Look how he starts in verses 2 and 3. "Surely I am too stupid to be a man. I've not the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One." That's a startling thing to say at the end of the book. Is it hyperbole? Maybe a bit of false humility or modesty?

It's probably a bit of both. And yet I think it's more than that. It's not simply that he lacks intelligence. He's recognizing something broken in himself, something broken that goes all the way down. Eugene Peterson captures it in the message. He renders the first line, "I'm more animal than human." And that word animal is perfect. It's Augur reaching back, maybe unintentionally, to the problem we all carry. Remember, Genesis tells us we were made in God's image, made to reflect him, to bow to him, to trust his word. That was the whole calling of Adam and Eve in the garden. But when the serpent came, and Genesis is very clear to tell us that the serpent was subtle, craftier than any beast of the field. When he came, they listened to his word instead of God's. They bowed to the creature instead of the maker. And in bowing, they became like him. Meredith Klein, in his, I think, profoundly creative *Kingdom Prologue*, noticed how the Hebrew makes the point. The word for the serpent's craft, subtle, and the word for what Adam and Eve discover they are, naked, they sound almost identical. And Hebrew loves to do this. I don't want to press the point too far, but I think the suggestion's there. They followed the animal, and they came away bearing his likeness. That's what Augur's getting at. That's what he's naming.

"I'm too stupid to be a man. I'm more animal than human." This is who we are when we stop listening to the one who made us. This is what the fall cost us. And this makes the difference

between how Adam and Eve respond to their exposure and how Augur responds to it all the more striking. When God came walking in the garden calling, what did the man and woman do? They hid. They covered themselves and made excuses. The serpent's craftiness had already become their own. But Augur does the opposite. He walks out where God can see him. He says the true thing about himself before God has to say it for him. No covering, no excuses, just, "I am too stupid to be a man. I have not knowledge of the Holy One." Friends, that's a creature taking his proper place before the Creator without being made to. And then listen to how he presses into it in verse 4 with a series of questions that anybody who knows the Book of Job will recognize. "Who has ascended to heaven and come down? He says, "who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth?" God asks Job questions just like these out of the whirlwind. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" And it's not that God is being cruel. He's being honest.

You see, the gap between what God knows and what we know isn't a matter of degree, as if he simply knows more than we do. It's a different thing altogether. And Augur has taken that so deeply to heart that he sets himself down with the questions to regain a proper perspective. And then in verses 5-6, he tells us where a man like him, humbled, should go. "Every word of God proves true," he says. "He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar." You see, a man who's come to the end of his own wisdom has one place left to go, and it isn't a better version of himself. It's the word of God, refined, without a trace of dross. The man who finally quits trusting in himself is exactly the man who can start trusting that word, not as a last resort, but as the only ground we're standing on. Friends, I want us to hold on to that. We're going to come back to it before we're through, but before we do, think about this. It's one thing for us to say that God's word is a refuge. It's another thing entirely to actually turn and speak to the God whose word it is, to open our hearts to him in prayer. Too often we say what's right theologically, we make the statement, and then stop as if that's all there is to it.

Augur doesn't do that. Having come to the end of himself and having found his footing in God's word, he prays. And here's something that should give us pause. Augur's prayer is the only prayer in the whole book of Proverbs. 29 chapters of teaching and warning, and just once do we hear a man stop talking about God and start talking to him. Augur takes everything he's just confessed about himself and he brings it straight to the Lord, and this is what he asks in verses 7 - 9. "Two things I ask of you, deny them not to me before I die, remove far from me falsehood and lying, give me neither poverty nor riches, feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be fool and deny you and say who is the Lord, or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." Two things, not a ranked wish list, just two requests, step side by side with neither claiming priority over the other. Take the first one, remove falsehood and lying. A man who's just told us God's word is true, wants his own words to be true too. After all the lie was the serpent's tongue and Augur's asking to speak a different language, but it's the second request I want us to focus on this morning. "Give me neither poverty nor riches," he says. This is a truly remarkable request.

I mean for 29 chapters, Proverbs has mostly good things to say about wealth. It's the fruit of diligence, the blessing on hard and honest work, the inheritance a good man leaves his children's children. The book even tells us in chapter 22 that the reward of humility and the fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life. To put it plainly, wealth in Proverbs isn't a villain. It can be a genuine gift received with a full and grateful heart. And yet, here as the book brings its wisdom to a climax, for the first and only time in the whole book, a wise man

asks God not to make him rich. Why? What has Augur understood about wealth that the rest of us tend to forget? Well we need to keep in mind what Proverbs does consistently the moment it sets wealth in our hands. It pries our fingers open. Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce. And it hands us a paradox. One gives freely, yet grows all the richer. Another withholds what he should give and only suffers want. And it issues a plain warning. Shut your ears to the cry of the poor and the day will come when they cry out and aren't, when you cry out and aren't answered. Friends, these Proverbs press the same point from three different directions.

Wealth isn't, it's not like a private pool that we've been given to bask beside and guard. It's more like a stream it's meant to move. It's been given to us to flow out of us. Our open hands are the whole point. And yet, there's more to it than just our open hands. You see, open hands only come from a heart that's already open to the Lord and knows it wasn't made for this gift, but it was made for the giver. There's a phrase Proverbs loves, better a little. Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. Better a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice. Why? Why is this? Because riches won't hold still. Listen to chapter 23: "Do not toil to acquire wealth when your eyes light on it. It's gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings flying like an eagle toward heaven. You reach for it and it's already in the air." Friends, wealth is a gift to receive and a trust to give away, but it was never meant to be the thing you live for. And yet, we need to be careful here, I think. After everything we've said about the dangers of wealth, it'd be easy to hear this prayer as a vote for poverty, as if the safest thing were to have too little. But that's not it.

Augur prays against poverty, too. He isn't asking to be poor, he's asking for something more precise, the food that is needful for him, his daily portion. And that's because he knows that the man who has exactly what he needs for today, still has to come back to the Lord tomorrow. Needful is the amount that keeps him daily on his knees praying. And Augur's praying, he's asking to be kept from any condition, too much or too little, that would make him forsake the one whose name he carries. But what does that look like? What does that actually look like to forsake the one whose name you carry? Well, Augur shows us in verse 9, and he names two ways it happens, one on each side of them. Here's the first, "lest I be full and deny you and say, who is the Lord?" That's the danger on the wealthy side, okay? And it's hard to guard against, because it almost never sounds like the words in the verse, who is the Lord, said straight to God's face. Instead, it comes on slowly. We stop praying about the thing we used to pray about, because we've got it handled. We give less than we used to, because the margin's tight, and they're real expenses, and we'll get back to it later. Self-sufficiency has a way of letting itself into our homes. And once it's there, it starts moving the furniture around. And one day, you notice that trust has become a thing you affirm on Sunday, but you don't really need on Tuesday. And the word needful starts to sound like someone else's word, someone with less than you, but not you. Look at the other side of the coin, though.

Look at the second half of verse 9. He says, "lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." I want to be careful about here. I don't want to pass judgment on poverty, and Proverbs doesn't either. And yet, Augur prays against poverty with exactly the same weight. And that's because poverty has its own danger. When the need feels like it's too much to bear, and God's provision feels too slow or too far off, a personal take what isn't his. And Augur sees what comes with that. It's not just a theft. It's a name disgraced. His God's name. Think of Jean Valjean in the beginning of *Les Mis*, a man who steals a loaf of bread because his sister's children are starving. Victor Hugo doesn't write him as a villain. He writes him as a

man pushed beyond his limit, whose need pressed him until he took what wasn't his. That's the danger Augur's getting at. The moment our needs get so loud that they drowned out our trust, and we reach for something that God hasn't given us. And don't think this is Valjean's danger only. Only for people who are truly desperate, somewhere far off. The same danger reaches us even in our relative comfort. It's there when giving would mean a real cut to the plans we've made, being wise. And so we hold back and tell ourselves we'll be generous later when things loosen up. It's also there when we've prayed for something we genuinely need, maybe a job or a restored relationship, and the answer hasn't come. And the way we could force a solution is sitting right in front of us. The form changes, but the danger stays basically the same. It's the same decision Augur feared, to stop trusting God and to take matters into our own hands.

Let's set them side by side, these dangers. Too much or too little. They look like opposites, but they both end up in the same place, saying the same thing. Who is the Lord? The full man says it out of having everything. I don't need him. The desperate man says it out of having nothing. He didn't come through, so I'll see to it myself. Who is the Lord? Two different roads to the same place, and Augur's praying to be kept in a narrow place between them. He's not asking to be kept in a comfortable one, but a narrow one. The one where neither temptation gets hold of him, where needful is still a word that fits him, because the God who hands him his daily portion is still the God he trusts. There's one last thing I want us to notice. Verse 9 is the first time in the whole chapter that Augur says God's covenant name, Yahweh. To me, it feels like he's been holding it back the entire time and using other names for God, but right at the moment he asks not to profane the Lord's name, he finally speaks it. It's almost as if his prayer answers the question he'd asked back in verse 4. What is his name? This. This is his name, Yahweh, and this is what it means to honor it, to pray every day to be kept in a place where you still need him.

Friends, this is what it looks like to pray about our wealth, not asking for more, but asking to be kept. Kept close enough to God that he stays as Augur prays it. My God, both for himself and for us. So that's Augur's prayer. Give me neither poverty nor riches. But perhaps you're here this morning and you're feeling maybe uncomfortably that you don't often have that kind of clarity or trust. That you rarely see yourself as plainly as Augur saw himself. I want to say to you, you're not alone. Most of us, if we're honest, don't see the danger coming the way Augur did. We tend to drift, like we put it earlier. The furniture of our finances gets rearranged before we even notice the room has changed. Friends, what we need isn't just Augur's faithful example. This isn't just a, this isn't a, you know, be like Augur. Friends, we need his prayer prayed for us and lived out by someone who could actually be trusted to live exactly where Augur asked to live. And there is one.

Think of where the Gospels send Jesus right at the beginning of his ministry. Into the wilderness, remember? Forty days without food and then the tempter comes. And notice what he's tempted with. Because it's the very two dangers Augur prayed to be kept from. And they're hitting him one after another. First, command these stones to become bread. That's the desperate man's temptation. Take what you need by your own hand, because God is too slow. But then from a high mountain, all the kingdoms of the world in their glory, all this I will give you if you will fall down and worship me. That's the rich man's temptation. Everything, all at once, in exchange for your worship. Who is the Lord? Answered by bowing before a false god. Both dangers. The same two Augur saw coming for himself. And how does Jesus resist them? He doesn't do it with willpower or scheming. He resists them the way Augur said a humbled man should resist them with the word of God. "It is written" "man shall not live by

bread alone. It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” You remember what Augur said back in verse 5 and 6? “Every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” That’s the shield Jesus takes up in the wilderness. He stands exactly where Augur prays to stand between two dangers, trusting the word and he doesn’t move.

Friends, Jesus prayed Augur’s prayer with his life and he prayed it perfectly where every one of us fails. And here’s the thing, because he stood firm where you and I can’t or couldn’t, you and I don’t have to stand there on our own. The contentment, and that’s what he’s getting at, the contentment Augur longed for, the contentment none of us can manufacture, it becomes possible only in Jesus. Listen to the apostle Paul writing in Philippians 4. He’s writing from a prison cell of all places. Think about that. I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. I want you to notice that he says, I have learned. You see, contentment didn’t come naturally to Paul any more than it comes naturally to you and me. It was learned over time through his dependence on the one who had already walked that road ahead of him. In a few moments we’re going to stand and sing one of my favorite hymns, “Be Thou My Vision”. There’s a verse in it that could be the prayer we’ve been reflecting on set to music. “Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise. Thou my inheritance now and always, thou and thou only, first in my heart, high king of heaven, my treasure thou art.” Don’t you hear Augur’s heart in those words? Riches I heed not, give me neither poverty nor riches. Thou my inheritance, my treasure thou art. Not the gift, the giver. That’s the whole of it.

When we have God himself as our inheritance, we are free, truly free to hold our wealth with an open hand. Because we know that we already have everything we could ever need. Friends, in the week ahead, you’ll be tempted. You’ll be tempted to find your security in what you own, or to panic over what you don’t. Augur knew that same temptation, and so he prayed. Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with the food that is needful. Friends, pray this with him this week. And pray it knowing what he could only hope for. That the one who kept his own son in that narrow place is able to keep you there too. And that he himself, the giver of all good things, is the inheritance that can never be taken from you. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank you. We thank you for your kindness to us. We thank you for your wisdom. Father, we need wisdom from above, and you provide it. We ask, Lord, that the lessons from Augur’s prayer will go deep within us. Help us to recognize our dependence on you. Help us to see your incredible generosity. And help us to trust in you always. And we ask these things in the precious name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.