

COMMON PLACE BUT COMPLEX!

Today's Text: Prov. 30: 15-33

Extracts:

There are three *things* which are *too wonderful for me*, yes, four which I do not understand: *the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea, and the way of a man with a virgin. There are four things which are little on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in the summer; the rock badgers are a feeble folk, yet they make their homes in the crags; the locusts have no king, yet they all advance in ranks; the spider skillfully grasps with its hands, and it is in kings' palaces* [Prov. 30: 18-19, 24-28].

*We all know about the **common cold**. When you are sneezing with runny nose, nasal congestion, itchy throat, cough and other such like symptoms, be sure that you have caught the common cold. It can last for a few days or a few weeks. The infection gets worse at certain times of the year, especially when children, the commonest victims, return to school from around September and until the school year is over by June. That is because the common cold is spread when many people with the infection are crowded together in the same room. According to the National Institute of Health of the US Department of Health and Human Services, the common cold is the leading cause of doctor visits and missed days from school and work.¹ The cold relief industry is a multi-billion dollar business all over the world.*

But do you know what? Doctors and researchers have not found a cure or even an effective vaccine for the common cold!² Man has made enormous strides in conquering space and complex diseases like cancer and HIV/AIDS but the common cold has been most elusive. Scientists have not been able to establish what causes it! Why would such a commonplace thing be so complex? In today's lesson, based on Proverbs Chapter 30, we shall come across several of such commonplace things that will blow our minds. I am sure that you are as anxious as I am to get into the study!

¹ The Common Cold, www.niad.nih.gov/factsheets/cold.htm

² Symptoms and causes of the common cold, www.webguru.com/common-cold.htm

1. Commonsense is not common!

What is commonsense? Is it the sense that is common? Of course, that does not make sense! *Commonsense is what a community or group of people consider as generally reasonable or acceptable.* If that is the case, then commonsense may mean different things to different societies. For example, Westerners cannot understand or appreciate how one man can marry multiple wives, as in Moslem and non-Western societies. A conservative non-Westerner or Moslem may in turn not understand how a man can live with only one wife. Therefore, by human standards, commonsense is not common!

The only commonsense that is universal comes from God. Here again, we have as many views of God as there are religions. Even among those who share the same view of God, there are different interpretations or understanding of what He is. A good example can be found in the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus [**Jn 3: 1-21**]. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. As a Pharisee, he believed in the resurrection of the dead. As a Jewish ruler, he was expecting the coming of the Messiah. He came to Jesus by night and said, “Rabbi, *we know that You are a teacher come from God*; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” [**vv. 1-2**]. Therefore, he was a very knowledgeable man of letters and the word of God. He had the commonsense of the Jews of his days.

Then, Jesus threw his commonsense into a spin when He replied Nicodemus thus, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” [**v. 3**]. Bewildered, Nicodemus replied, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he *enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” [**v. 4**]. All that Nicodemus heard that triggered his confusion was “born again.” Commonsense taught him that human beings were born only once. Even when Jesus tried to explain it to him, he remained confused and said, “How can this be?” In response, Jesus asked him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” [**vv. 5-9**]

I can feel for Nicodemus because I once found myself in a similar situation. I came to New York in September 1971 as a young postgraduate student from Africa who had never been to the Western world. I was hungry and went to a hamburger stand and asked for a sandwich. The vendor told me that he had “hot dogs.” I ran away, wondering how they could be eating dogs in America! It was my roommate, an American, who later explained to me that a hot dog was a beef-burger. Why did the vendor not say so in the first place? But why did I not wait to ask for clarification?

Let me render the question that Jesus threw at Nicodemus in the following manner: *are you a true believer and do not know these things?* Agur wrote chapter 30 of the book of Proverbs. In humility, he began by saying, “Surely I am more stupid than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom nor have knowledge of the Holy One” [**vv. 2-3**]. Yet, his next lines were so profound. He wrote, “Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? ... What is His name, and what is His Son’s name?” [**v.4**]. Jesus Himself

confirmed Agur’s profound words when He told Nicodemus, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” [Jn 3: 13]. Did Agur speak from commonsense or spiritual guidance? The answer is obvious. *Anything that God speaks in His word, the Bible, may look common but the message is not common!* This position is well put by Paul as follows [1 Cor. 1: 27-28]:

*But God has chosen the **foolish things** of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the **weak things** of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty, and the **base things** of the world and the things which are **despised** God has chosen, and the **things which are not**, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.*

Examine the emphasized words: foolish things, weak things, base things, despised things, things that are not. Are those not the things that we take for granted? Are those not commonplace things that God uses to confound the so-called wise people that we claim to be? There are interesting surprises for us after studying such things that Agur mentioned in the chapter under reference.

2. Commonsense things can be quite complex!

In the table below, I have summarized the commonplace things mentioned in Proverbs Chapter 30. They are in four main groups: four things that are *never satisfied* (the grave, the barren womb, the earth and fire), four *wonderful things* (an eagle in the air, a serpent upon a rock, a ship at sea and a man with a virgin/maid), four *little but wise creatures* (ants, rock badgers, also called conies or hyrax [Lev. 11: 5], locusts and the spider), and four *majestic things* (a lion, a greyhound, the he goat and the king). We cannot do justice to all of them in this lesson. So, I have selected one wonderful thing (an eagle in the air) and one little but wise thing (the spider) to illustrate profound spiritual lessons that we can learn from common things.

COMMONPLACE BUT COMPLEX THINGS MENTIONED IN PROVERBS 30	
<u>Insatiable things [vv. 15-16]</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The grave <input type="checkbox"/> The barren womb <input type="checkbox"/> The earth <input type="checkbox"/> The fire 	<u>Little but wise things [vv. 24-28]</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ants that prepare food in the summer <input type="checkbox"/> Rock badgers that build houses on the rock <input type="checkbox"/> Locusts with no kings but advance in ranks <input type="checkbox"/> The spider that lives in kings’ palaces
<u>Wonderful things [vv. 18-19]</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> An eagle in the air <input type="checkbox"/> A serpent upon a rock <input type="checkbox"/> A ship at sea <input type="checkbox"/> A man with a virgin/maid 	<u>Things which are majestic [vv. 29-31]</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The lion <input type="checkbox"/> The greyhound <input type="checkbox"/> The male goat <input type="checkbox"/> A king

a) *An eagle in the air*

The eagle [**Job 39: 27-30**] is a bird of prey. It feeds on other animals, notably rodents and fish. It has very sharp eyes and can see from afar. It dwells and resides mainly on the cliff of the rock, and nests up high.

The eagle can be seen flying on end without perching, looking for prey hundreds of metres below. As soon as it spots a prey, it swoops down from such an angle that the prey can hardly see the death coming. Our main interest today is in its wings. Is the eagle ever tired of flying?

The interesting story comes when we know how God has trained the eagle to fly on end. When a storm is coming, most of us scamper for cover. We build shelters and go there to hide for safety. That is not for the eagle. Instead, it heads in the direction of the storm! When it hits the ferocious winds, the eagle is propelled way above the storm and flies safely above it! In the process, its wings are strengthened and it can continue to fly almost endlessly.

What spiritual lesson does that teach us? Let us examine the following:

- The word of God says, “Those who wait on the Lord *shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint*” [**Is. 40: 31**]. Jesus Himself has told us in the Sermon on the Mount, “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into bands; yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” [**Matt. 6: 26**]. Can we trust as much in the Lord as the eagle does? Can we face the storms of life instead of running away from them? Do we realize that, as God is using the storms to train and strengthen the wings of the eagle, so also He is using the challenges that we face daily to strengthen our ability to cope?
- Like the waitress/waiter in a restaurant, to wait on the Lord is to serve and worship Him. The waitress cannot hurry the customers to finish their food, just as the eagle cannot hurry God to bring the next storm! Rather, s{he) stays at a corner where he/she can monitor the progress that the customers are making, irrespective of what personal problems the waitress may have! Occasionally, s{he) comes around with a broad smile on the face to ask if the customers are enjoying themselves! How many of us can wait on God like that unless we have the wings of an eagle that will enable us to mount over the storms of impatience, disappointments, postponements, failures and hardships? In deed, the eagle in the air has much to teach believers.

b) *The spider in the king's palace*

The spider, the inspiration for the popular *Spider Man* cartoons later turned into blockbuster movies, is a small creature that weaves cobwebs for a home and for trapping its prey. Since the delicate silk-like cobwebs can easily be destroyed by the wind or heavy traffic, the little animal always looks for safe places to build its home. One such safe place, if not the safest, is the king's palace [**Prov. 30: 28**]. How come?

The king's palace is saturated with servants who perform one chore or the other. Even among the cleaners, there are those who specialize on the floors or the ceilings or the lawns, and so on. Where do you think that the spider will build a safe home? It will certainly be in a corner that is inaccessible to even the most dutiful servants! It has to be in the upper high corners of each room. Look at your own home that you clean everyday. Look up the ceiling of your living room or bedroom. Look at the top corners of your kitchen drawers. There are cobwebs! Yet, you use these places everyday.

What spiritual lessons do we learn from that experience? Here are some of them:

- Just as the spider is looking for safety in the palace of the king, so do believers look for safety in the palace of Jesus, the King of kings! He has said, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you maybe also" [**Jn 14: 2-3**]. No matter the hardship that the spider suffers in the hands of cleanliness-freaks, it survives to keep spurning cobwebs! In like manner, "we are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed... For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" [**2 Cor. 4: 8,9, 17**].
- Just as cobwebs are found in a room that is used and swept daily, even in the king's palace, so are cobwebs in our minds and hearts in spite of our daily exercise through reading the word of God. The less often a room is used, the bigger and stronger are the cobwebs. Some people cannot even finish reading one page of the newspaper before they give up. It is not because they do not know how to read. It is largely due to mental laziness. In such people, the cobwebs have virtually taken over their minds and brains! Can you then imagine those who hardly read the Bible? If "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God" [**Rom. 10: 17**], how do those who do not read the Bible grow their faith? Demonic spiders have woven spiritual cobwebs around them and they need to clean

up the King's house. After all, "do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" [1 Cor. 3: 16].

3. Conclusion: Never take anything for granted!

An important lesson out of this study is that we should *never overlook anything, no matter how familiar it may look*. A good example is the death of Jesus on the cross. *On the surface*, we just take it that "wicked Jews" who threw aside their normal justice system because they wanted Him dead were responsible for His death. In the light of today's lesson, I have gone back to study the story and I have made some remarkable discoveries. Remember the words of Jesus, "My Father loves Me because I lay down My life that I may take it again. *No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down, and I have power to take it again*" [Jn 10: 15-16].

Several times during His earthly ministry, the Jewish leaders sought to kill Him "but no one laid hand on Him because His hour had not yet come" [Jn 7: 30]. However, as the time drew near, He soared like the eagle in the direction of the gathering storm in Jerusalem. The disciples watched Him going before them "and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid" [Mk 10: 32]. During His trial, He was the prosecutors' star witness! When they asked Him questions, the true answers to which could have set Him free, He refused to answer. However, those that would lead to His conviction, He duly answered [Mk 14: 60-64; 15: 1-15]! In deed, He laid down His life by Himself. That measures how much love God has for us [Jn 3: 16].

Don't take anything around you for granted, such as relations with your spouse, children, colleagues, neighbours, and most especially God. Commonsense is not common. Common things are complex!