

the PRAYER of AGUR

Ancient Wisdom
for Discovering
Your Sweet Spot in Life

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JAY PAYLEITNER

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*To Alec, Lindsay, Randall, Rachel, Max,
Megan, Isaac, Kaitlin, and Rae Anne.
I pray you continue to seek, find,
and live in God's sweet spot.*

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Give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.

—PROVERBS 30:8



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Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

Are you, like me, caught in the middle? Being pulled in two directions? Some days, we want more. More opportunities. More responsibilities. And, yes, more stuff. Other days, we want less. Fewer distractions. Fewer responsibilities. Less stuff to take care of and worry about.

We're either energized or exhausted. Confident or reluctant. Spiritually in tune or entertaining doubts.

Allow me to introduce you to Agur. He's the guy inspired by God to unscramble this exact conundrum. Agur's commonsensical approach to life and his strangely amusing chapter near the end of the book of Proverbs reveal how you already might be in the center of God's will. That's a wonderful place to be. Especially in today's turbulent culture.

Join me as we consider living in God's sweet spot. Finding a balance between too much and too little. Inviting Him to simply love us where we are. And knowing we can trust Him to provide exactly what we need.

Warmly,
Jay Payleitner

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Introduction

You picked up this small book—and I wrote it—because of the allure of a short prayer hidden in plain sight in the book of Proverbs. It reads easily. Speaks honestly. And contains a nice little unexpected twist. Here it is:

Two things I ask of you, LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, “Who is the LORD?”
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God. (30:7–9)

Read it again. And maybe a third time.

Did you get it? There’s a chance you did. Totally. Message received. If that’s the case, you can put this book back on the shelf and move on to your next theological brainteaser. For savvy people like you, this passage is fairly straightforward.

Or is it?

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I submit there's more to the Prayer of Agur and the surrounding passages than you might imagine. There's quite a bit of subtext and tons of application for today. So before you go, allow me to tease you with a few unexpected observations regarding Agur and his contribution to one of the most quoted books of the Bible.

First, Agur's prayer is the *only* prayer in all of Proverbs. Considering the many topics covered and the literary devices included in the book of Proverbs, that should come as a bit of a surprise.

Second, while there are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament predicting Jesus as the coming Messiah, the chapter written by Agur is one of a handful of times where the idea of God *having a son* is actually mentioned (see verse 4). It turns out Agur was more than just a guy who wrote commonsense prayers. He was a true prophet.

Third, Agur's short yet powerful prayer is especially applicable today. Too many individuals, families, churches, and communities are trapped in a cycle of self-destructive behavior including lying to ourselves, lying to others, chasing wealth, and fearing poverty. The twenty-first-century life is way out of balance, careening between extremes. Agur is praying desperately to see the big picture and live in that sweet spot of knowing Jesus, knowing He is enough, and knowing He's got a plan for our lives.

Finally, I hope you will stay with me and dig deep into Proverbs 30 *in its entirety*. All thirty-three verses. The words of Agur could very well leave you with a new perspective on the perks of

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humility, the dark side of hypocrisy, and the eternal rewards of trusting God. Plus, you also will be invited to ponder how ants can carry so much weight, why lizards sneak into castles, and how snakes slither. Sound like fun?

As promised by the title, this book is mostly about a prayer. But like every prayer, there's a story behind it. That story is well worth uncovering.

Moving forward, we're going to go line by line through this second-to-last chapter of Proverbs and unearth what little we know about this fellow named Agur.

- First, we'll look at the six verses that build a platform for Agur's prayer.
- Then we'll spend some extra time properly examining verses 7–9, which contain that paradoxical petition.
- After the prayer, Agur turns the wordplay up a notch by presenting five short, peculiar lists that make the second half of the chapter feel more like a television game show than Scripture.
- Finally, we'll close with an unexpected bonus that comes with living in God's sweet spot. It's a gift you don't want to miss.

So stick around. This small book delivers a big message. When you've finished, share it with a few like-minded friends, questioning seekers, or skeptical cynics. See if their impressions and take-aways match yours. Let's get this party started.

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WHAT IS A SWEET SPOT?

Tennis players know there is a sweet spot on their racket where the ball jumps off the nylon strings with maximum velocity and precision. When that happens, there's no vibration in their hand and the ball travels straight and true.

The same is true of baseball bats and vocal performances. You'll hear players say things like, "It was a fast ball down the middle, and it found the sweet spot of my bat." Or vocalists might say, "I love that song. It's really in my sweet spot."

Career counselors will describe your sweet spot as the job where your gifts and passions intersect with the needs of the marketplace. In other words, doing what you love, doing it well, and getting paid for it.

Likewise, there is a way God wants you to live. Where you're living with purpose, not futility. Where your senses garner clarity, not chaos. It's not running too fast or too slow. It's not amassing a fortune or living in squalor.

You'll find your sweet spot when you have a sense of belonging because you know God loves you for who you are, not what you do. Sound good?

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Major Impact from a Minor Character

Allow me to introduce a man I am quite confident will be a new friend, colleague, and favorite author. His name is Agur. He's smart, funny, and quite perceptive. He loves God. He's streetwise in a good way. And he's not afraid to speak his mind.

Agur recognizes there is much he does not know. But he asks good questions. He will occasionally interrupt himself right in the middle of a stream of thoughtful teaching to deliver a seemingly random but enlightening truth we all need to hear. His writings make for quite a wild ride.

Somehow, Agur's writings made their way into the book of Proverbs. You have to give him credit for that. Three millennia ago there were quite a few word-slingers filling papyrus scrolls with inspired ruminations. Being included in the Old Testament alongside kings, prophets, and other spiritual giants is quite a coup.

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Bible scholars agree that Solomon personally wrote or compiled chapters 1 through 29 of Proverbs. But how and why the last two chapters were tacked on is a bit of a mystery. No one disputes their relevance or authenticity, but very little is known about the authors.

We do know that Lemuel, author of chapter 31, was a king who received wise teaching from his mother. King Lemuel's celebrated description in verses 10–31 of a “wife of noble character” has helped keep that last chapter of Proverbs in the limelight. The “Proverbs 31 woman” is a popular theme at women's events.

Even less is known about Agur, author of chapter 30. As indicated in the opening words of the chapter, he was the son of Jakeh, another obscure reference, and he may have been from northern Arabia.¹ That's all the history we have. I suspect most readers of the Bible have never spent more than a moment considering his name, his reputation, or his single puzzling appearance in Scripture. Actually, that's not unusual. There are quite a few historical characters who show up for a single scene or have only the briefest mention in the Bible but still leave a memorable impression. To prove the point, let's take a quick look at three of them.

There's Simeon, the aging prophet who met Mary and Joseph at the temple in Jerusalem when they presented Jesus soon after the fortieth day following His birth. The Holy Spirit had promised Simeon he would not die before seeing the Messiah. Taking the infant in his arms, the old man prophesied that Jesus would be a

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light to the world, causing the fall and rise of many people. His memorable story takes up a mere eleven verses in Luke 2.

The name Jochebed is mentioned only twice—both times in long genealogies. But we could make the case that her actions *launched* biblical history. The mother of three heroes of the faith—Moses, Aaron, and Miriam—Jochebed had the foresight and courage to send three-month-old Moses floating down the Nile in a papyrus basket to rescue him from Egyptian death squads (see Exodus 1–2). We may not remember her name, but she should be revered as a beacon of hope for anyone living under oppression and for mothers who love their children enough to let them go.

A third unforgettable biblical character mentioned ever so briefly is the repentant thief on the cross. On that history-changing Friday at Golgotha, one criminal hurled abusive taunts at Jesus, but the other recognized the divinity of Christ and confessed his own brokenness. We don't know his name, but that thief's insight at the triple crucifixion brings hope to those who come to Christ late in life, even in their final moments. In addition, Jesus's promise to the thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), suggests there is no lag time between our time on earth and our entrance into heaven. That's good to know.

It's also good to know that modest lives like yours and mine can still make an impact. Can you identify with a guy who was moved to tears when he held a new baby, a mother who saw a great leader when she looked at her infant son, or someone whose eyes

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were opened upon meeting Jesus for the first time? Like Agur, these were real people. Simeon, Jochebed, and the thief on the cross were simply doing life.

On the other hand, the larger-than-life characters in the Bible—like Noah, Moses, Elijah, Abraham, David, Paul—can be a bit difficult to relate to. After all, God spoke to them on multiple occasions, and the Bible chronicles significant portions of their lives. That’s why, when I first came across Proverbs 30, I knew I had found an ally in Agur, a fellow humble traveler on this road of life.

I appreciate that Agur’s sayings—all thirty-three verses of Proverbs 30—made the cut. Since the chapter *is* included, then clearly the Bible would be incomplete without it! Which means we have a responsibility to spend time reflecting on how Agur’s words apply to our lives.

What’s more, his voice and his message desperately need to be heard today by anyone who longs for a like-minded friend and a dose of reality.

A Note to Skeptics, Cynics, and Seekers

In his chapter—and especially in his prayer—Agur admits he doesn’t have all the answers and asks for help. He confesses that falsehoods occasionally flow from his mouth. He can’t always discern between the truth and lies he hears from others. He knows he needs a certain cash flow, but he doesn’t want too much or too little.

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The idea that a prophet and contributor to the Bible lives with a bit of angst and uncertainty should be a comfort. In this life, it's okay if we don't have all the answers. God welcomes our doubts and questions. Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37, *ESV*) and, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Like us, Agur has all kinds of questions and makes many quirky observations. That's why Proverbs 30 is so engaging. Agur is the real deal, flaws and all.

The Bible is filled with people who make mistakes, turn to God, find answers, and then still attempt to do life under their own power. Thankfully, God's love overrides their failures . . . and ours.

So bring your doubts, questions, fears, and suspicions. God is big enough to handle them. You won't hurt His feelings. After all, He knows them anyway.

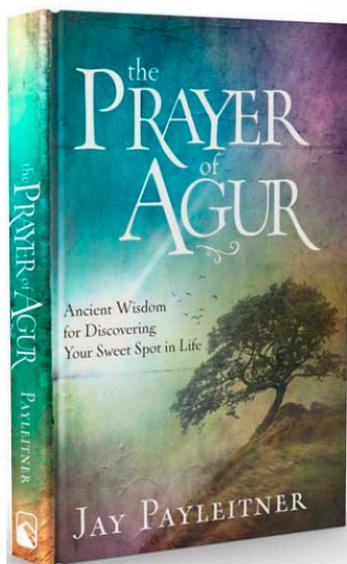
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