

The Wisdom of Ants

July 18, 2010 - Proverbs 30:24-25

Is it just me? Or have some of you noticed that we live in the me-now world? The me part is that “it’s all about me.” So coffee shops provide your drink to your exact specification. I stood in line behind someone who was getting four complicated drinks for co-workers—in one of them she made the point it was a half squirt of some addition not a full squirt! Laptops come in a variety of colors for our selection. Cell phones in new colors and applications, soon they will even look like you. Our family just had the privilege of going to Alaska. My Mom graciously provided for 10 of us to enjoy a cruise. We started in a place called Seward, Alaska and ended up in Vancouver. If you’ve ever gone on a cruise, you’ve experienced a world that caters to “it’s all about me.” How would you like your eggs? What would you like from the buffet? What can we do to make this a five star cruise for you? How would you like your beds made? We went through culture shock when we got back home and had to prepare our own bowl of cereal. It can be so easy to slide into the “all about me” world.

The now part of the me-now culture is we can have whatever we want now. No money down. Don’t pay for a full year. You can drive it away this weekend or have it delivered next week. A lot of Canadians seem to be buying into the Me-Now culture. There was an article out this week about Canadian’s saving habits. 45% of Canadians do not save on a regular basis. Nearly 1/3 do not have a savings plan. Nearly 1 in 5 don’t have any rainy day savings at all. I know there are multiple reasons this can happen. Could some of this lack of saving be because we have bought into the me-now culture? Me-now also applies to relationships and marriage. A person falls in love. They want to show love. So they have sex now not after the wedding. A person is unhappy in their marriage. They want happiness now. So they dump the marriage for someone new. Me-now living threatens contentment.

It can be challenging figuring out how to live when the cultural current flows in the me-now direction. But there are hopeful signs. It seems that a lot of people recognize the value of investing in others. We have seen many of you invest in others this past week at VBS. Several of our young people are investing in others at camps or on mission trips. Many of you are involved in ministries to others, yet it can be so easy to slide into

the me-now culture stream. So, today we are going to learn a way to swim against the stream. In the spirit of VBS, I thought I would frame this truth in a little rhyme.

Not sure how to live life? Just want to rant? Then look at God's wisdom displayed through the ants.

We begin a summer series of messages today from a collection of wisdom writings in the Bible. The dictionary defines wisdom as “good sense” or “the ability to make sensible decisions and judgments based on personal knowledge and experience.” But in Hebrew, the word goes a little beyond this definition. It implied a skill. So here's a Biblical definition of wisdom that I'd like us to keep in mind over the next few weeks.

Biblical wisdom is skill from God for living. People may be skilled at their job or skilled gardeners or artists. But not a lot of people live skillfully. Where would we go to find this skill from God? The Book of Proverbs is one source. It explains all kinds of basic skills for living. And it shows what these skills look like with lots of word pictures. We're going to discover a key skill for swimming against the me-now stream.

But some of you might be tempted to tune me out right now because you see this as a brief look at some ancient sayings. You want to get outside and get on with the day.

If you're experiencing those kinds of thoughts right now, would you consider for a moment the spiritual battle going on for your mind and attention right now? We have learned as a church family in the letter to the Romans that all of us are sinners. We received a sin nature when we were born. Sin warped our nature and our thinking.

Why? “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires. The mind of the sinful man is death. The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.” But because of Christ's death, those who have received Him have the mind of Christ. Since we have received the Holy Spirit, through Him we receive the wisdom of God. This wisdom is completely countercultural or contrary to what you will hear and see around today.

Christ died so we could receive God's wisdom. Remember Romans 12:2? Because of Christ's death – you no longer have to conform to the pattern of this world but you can be transformed by the renewing of your

mind. Then you will be able to test, approve what God's will is." You will be able, in other words, by God's gospel and power to swim against the me-now. So, I invite you to engage in this fight for your thinking over the next few minutes. God's wisdom comes for us in the lives of these little animals.

To discover this, we're going to answer 2 questions. What wisdom does God display through little animals? How do we apply this wisdom to our lives?

Proverbs 30:1-4 (NIV)

- ¹ The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an oracle :
This man declared to Ithiel,
to Ithiel and to Ucal:
- ² "I am the most ignorant of men;
I do not have a man's understanding.
- ³ I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
- ⁴ Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and the name of his son?
Tell me if you know!

Proverbs 30:1-4 (ESV)

30:1 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.

2 Surely I am too stupid to be a man.
I have not the understanding of a man.

3 I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

4 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!

Proverbs 30:24-28

²⁴ "Four things on earth are small,
yet they are extremely wise:

²⁵ Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;

²⁶ coney are creatures of little power,
yet they make their home in the crags;

²⁷ locusts have no king,
yet they advance together in ranks;

²⁸ a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.

First, some basic information on Proverbs. A Biblical proverb briefly and graphically describes the way things are generally. The relationship between God and His people serve as the backdrop for these proverbs. Most Proverbs come from King Solomon when he reigned in Israel about 3000 years ago. But, this one comes from a fellow named Agur. We hardly know anything about this guy. He seems to be a non-Israelite, wise man from the East. We conclude that because his father Jakeh is also a non-Israelite name. It's hard to know what Agur is saying in the first four verses. Is he being sarcastic? Is he being overly humble? Or is he sincerely wondering and questioning about life?

You might have noticed the different translations provided by the New International Version and the English Standard Version. Both are possible, which leads to a little more mystery. But it seems most likely to me that he's honestly confessing his ignorance about life. He asks some deep questions. He seeks wisdom from somewhere. Those of you who have read the New Testament know we have a clear answer to his 5 questions in verse 4. The Triune God! Jesus Christ is the answer to all of his questions.

As Proverbs 30 progresses, Agur goes on to share discoveries of wisdom from God. Apparently, the Holy One satisfied his quest for wisdom. One collection of his sayings makes up verses 24-28. "Four things on earth are small, but exceedingly wise." The first is the ant in verse 25.

What is the wisdom God displays through ants?

“Ants are a people or creature of little strength.” You can step on an ant and it’s history. Yet, “they store up their food in the summer.”

What’s so profound about that? **Ants take advantage of the present to prepare for the future.** They store their food in summer. They work hard to collect food when available. So when the cooler weather and winter eventually come, they survive. How do we know this? Study an ant colony. In fact, the work habits of ants are so famous that they show up in one Aesop’s fables – the ant and the cricket. But we don’t have to go to Aesop or some scientific journal to discover this. If you have an ant colony in your yard, you have living proof of the truth of this claim. We have two ant colonies in our yard, one in the front and one in the back. Despite my poison attempts, running the mower over them and raking them out, the ant colony shows up in the same two places every year. How does that happen? Well, the ants store food in the summer so they can survive through the winter. Our ants don’t do a 10,000 kilometer migration to South America. They hibernate in their nests. They have no furnace, grocery store or pay check. They planted no crops nor do we feed them any food. They store up their food in the summer preparing for the winter and then burrow under the ground to survive the winter. Ants know what time it is and live accordingly. When it’s summer, they store up food. In winter, they hibernate.

How can this wisdom of ants apply to our lives?

We must discern the “seasons” in our lives and live accordingly. Farmers here understand – you plant in the spring; spray for weeds; nurture your crop; pray for rain and protection from hail. You harvest in summer and bring in the crop. Then you have something to live off through the winter. My grandparents lived off what they canned and lived off grain and farm animals. If you had a lean harvest it would be a lean winter. Some didn’t survive.

But for many of us city dwellers, the application is not so obvious. So let’s look at it this way. We need to prepare in the good times of life for the bad times. We need to use the good seasons of our life to

prepare for the winters that will inevitably come because what we take into the winter is what we have. So just like ants that use the present to prepare, we need to live in the present with an eye to the future. Some people live in the past. Some people live only in the present for the present. Some people live for the future – it's always something tomorrow that they look forward to. But the ants teach us to identify what time it is in our lives and then live accordingly.

What different times exist in life?

Well there are Spring times in life - new beginnings, lots of possibilities and opportunities or new life. There are Summer times when things go well. We enjoy lots of blessings. It is a time of harvest and abundance. Then there are Fall seasons. These are times of uncertainty, maybe transition or something is coming to an end. Then comes winter where it's frozen and cold.

What winters might we face?

What winters might come into our lives?

Well we may face economic or earnings winters. Maybe there's downsizing at work or we're unemployed. The market crashes or the industry changes. The kid's college days approach or we're about to retire and face a major income adjustment. A major car or home expense arises unexpectedly.

We'll likely go through health winters. Some endure a chronic illness because of some neglect or poor health habits when younger. Or maybe we suddenly face a serious illness ourselves or in our family which takes up a major chunk of our time and energy. Our spouse may have a major health issue. Someone has to go on long term disability. Or we face the death of our spouse. Or like several in our congregation, we're shut in and can't get out often to church or even out of our home.

We may go through marriage winters when we're under financial stress. Or we have teenage or young adult difficulties that constantly put strain on our relationships. There are times when the kids take up most of our time and energy and there is little time for each other. Or we go through a season of great emotional

distance from our spouse and wonder if we will ever be close again. Then there are the ultimate marriage winters of separation and divorce.

We can go through family winters when our parents or family members fight. Or one of our parents remarries and we don't know what this means for us. Or we have a family member struggling with alcohol, drugs, behavioral issues or some other addiction.

Sometimes we go through loneliness winters. We move away from close friends or close friends move away from us. We're going away to school or our friend's life situation changes significantly. Maybe we discover we have less in common with someone. Or maybe we wake up one day and realize we have few or no close friends.

Most Christians go through spiritual winters. Maybe your moving or have moved to a place where you know no Christians or don't know about a strong church. Or some strong Christian mentor is moving away or passes away. Maybe you're going through a spiritual winter of great distance from God and in it you feel very dry spiritually. Maybe we will one day face a time when we will not be allowed to freely gather for worship. Or we have no access to the Bible. Or we have to risk our lives to meet with other Christians. I'm sure you can think of other possible winters that we go through in life.

What are we doing now to prepare for those possible winters later? Remember our little rhyme – Not sure how to live life? Just want to rant? Then look at God's wisdom displayed through the ants. Ants know what time it is in life. They take advantage of the present to prepare for the future.

What might preparation look like?

Well, to prepare for an economic winter tomorrow, we've got to save today. To prevent health winters, we must take care of our health now. If we have good health, we must enjoy it and live and not waste it on petty things. To survive marriage winters tomorrow we must invest in our marriages today. Keep growing and dating and working at it and guarding them. To prepare for family winters, we must make time for family and cherish the good times. We must learn to appreciate an ordinary day. How many people in St. Albert would love to have a day without a drug episode, a slammed door, a court appearance, someone throwing things at

them, the police stopping by or an elephant in the room. To prepare or prevent loneliness winters, we must reach out and invest in others. And to prepare for spiritual winters where the core of faith might go through great testing, we must invest now in fellowship with God and other believers. Read, listen and soak up God's Word. Worship Him and make peace with Him and others.

Some of you have been or are doing this – saving now in preparation for something later – you're investing in your kids, while they're still home – you offer that daily compliment to your spouse.

If you've been resisting the trend of wanting everything now, that's living by God's wisdom. That's honoring God. That's taking the life God has given you and using it, investing it wisely. You're going deep with God and taking advantage of opportunities to draw near to Him. That's living like an ant!

So how might we apply the wisdom of ants to our lives?

Ask the Holy Spirit for clarify on the season of your life. If it's not clear already, ask Him to reveal to you the season you're in. Are you in Spring, Summer, Fall or Winter? Ants know what time it is.

Live accordingly

Christians, if you're in spring, summer or fall – enjoy/rejoice and prepare. Make a decision about finances. Invest more intentionally in marriage, family or relationships. Start taking better care of your health. Invest more time with God and other Christians who will spur you on in your faith. I know most of our small groups are not meeting throughout the summer. But I've said this before and I'll say it again – if you are not involved regularly with a small group of Christians to grow with, encourage each other and sharpen each other, you're missing out on half the Christian life. God intended for us to be part of a body of believers – not a collection of individual believers who happen to worship in the same room once a week. If in Spring, Summer, Fall – store up; prepare; get ready; get full of what you'll need through winter – especially the things of God.

But some of you are already in a winter season. What do you do then? Lean on the Lord and His people. Come to the Lord for His Strength and Help. Matt. 11:28-30.

Trust and hang on to His promises.

If you're not a Christian, I invite you to receive God's gift to prepare for the greatest winter you'll ever go through. The ant prepares for the winter in the summer. What are you doing to prepare for the ultimate winter in your life – death?

Every day we live is a day closer to that day. For some of us its sooner. For others later. But are you prepared now for that day? God sent Jesus to protect us from having to enter that eternal winter and to save us from the winter of life under sin's reign. Though we only deserved God's wrath, He offers us His mercy because His Son went to the cross to bear the wrath we deserved. That's the good news or Gospel. You can engage in the most significant act of preparation in your entire existence today. You do that by turning away from yourself and your works to earn right standing before God. Instead, turn to and put your trust in Christ both as your Savior and Lord. Instantly, your eternal destiny will be changed forever. You will be protected from that eternal winter of separation from God and look forward to the eternal summer in the presence of God. Will you turn from yourself, your sin or some other god and turn to Christ today?

In my office is a picture of the Tall Ships in Toronto. I received it from the parents of a lady named Teresa. We first met her when candidating for the position in Ottawa. She wore a scarf from the chemo treatments. Teresa became a part of my intercessory prayer support team. Teresa's husband died when he was 29, now at 46 she was facing terminal cancer. Within a year, the brain tumor was back, yet when I visited Teresa, she encouraged me. She almost always had a smile – how was that possible for a person who had gone through all this and was going to die young?

Teresa had prepared by going deep with God in the years He gave her.

I keep that picture in my office to remind me of that one who lived well and full even though her life was short.

Not sure how to live life? Just want to rant? Then look at God's wisdom displayed through the ants. And now will you talk with God about this? Then after a time of silence, I will close our time together.