

NUMERICAL RIDDLES

“...to understand a proverb and an enigma, the words of the wise and their riddles.” (1:6)

INTRODUCTION—Some of the most puzzling, yet profound riddles in Proverbs are found in the riddles of Agur (30:11-31). Each grouping of four observations, or proverbs, have something in common and it is that **common thread** which is the emphasis of each group.

These observations from nature and people shed light on human behavior, conveying moral truths that the reader must meditate on and extract after much thought. They are brainteasers that do not press their lessons strongly on a person, but after putting forth the effort to understand them, they are deeply etched in the mind.

I. FOUR CLASSES OF EVIL DOERS (30:11-14)

- A. There is a Generation... Likely every generation has its share of ingrates, self-righteous sinners, proud and arrogant men, and those whose covetousness knows no bounds and shows no mercy (cf. 30:17).

II. FOUR THINGS NEVER SATISFIED (30:15-16)

- A. The Leech (30:15). Its blood-sucking appetite is never satisfied. If that's not enough, its offspring has the same insatiable appetite. Thus, not only is it never **satisfied**, but that desire is **intensified**!
- B. Four Things Never Say 'It is Enough'" (30:16). The grave never fills, the barren womb never stops crying out for children, the dry parched earth drinks in the water and thirsts for more, and the fire needs constant fuel to burn. Even so a man's lusts and desires are never filled. Human greed and covetousness can never be filled, it must learn contentment with what it has (cf. 27:20).

III. FOUR THINGS THAT ARE INCOMPREHENSIBLE (30:18-19)

- A. Things too Wonderful for Us. How can an eagle hang in mid-air hundreds of feet above the ground? How can a smooth-bellied serpent, without legs, climb to the top of a smooth rock and cling there? How can a heavy ship, weighted down with cargo, float on top of the water when much smaller objects sink? What is that mysterious magnetic power which attracts certain men and women to one another instead of someone else?
 - 1. These are beyond man's comprehension. Likewise, man does not understand God's power and will—but he can stand in awe, then trust and believe in the ways of God (30:4-5).

IV. FOUR THINGS THAT ARE UNBEARABLE (30:21-23)

- A. People Not Suited for Their Promotion in Life. These people are nauseating to the world. They all have something in common—they have each been raised to a higher position and have 'let it go to their head,' becoming arrogant and feeling superior.
 - 1. A mistreated servant will be an oppressive ruler. The fool who receives an abundance will be too self-centered to share and use it. The hateful spinster will bring her bitterness and discontentment to the marriage and become doubly odious. Likewise, the maid who becomes the woman of the house will be intolerable.

V. FOUR SMALL BUT WISE THINGS (30:24-28)

- A. We Minimize the Worth of Small Things. These small creatures exhibit wisdom effectively, highlighting the fact that wisdom, not strength, is the key to success.

-
1. Ants (30:25). They redeem the time and make provisions for the future without being prodded (cf. 6:6). They make the best use of their abilities.
 2. Rock Badgers (30:26). These are rodents about the size of small rabbits. They realize their feebleness and frailty, therefore, do not trust in their strength, but flee to the rocks for safety from danger. They already know what we should know (cf. Psalm 46:1; 61:1-4).
 3. Locusts (30:27). Though each is small and insignificant, they show what a life of discipline, direction, order, cooperation, and unity can do (cf. Joel 1:4; 2:3-10).
 4. Spider [Lizard] (30:28). He is adept at 'getting places' through his ingenuity, determination, and persistence. He can even find his way into the most royal of places.

VI. FOUR STATELY THINGS (30:29-31)

- A. Some Things are Regal and Stately and Others are Not. Some interpret these passages as referring to arrogance or domination. That may be the meaning, or it may depict certain things as being grand and beautiful (30:29-31) in contrast with others who would do better if they stopped boasting (30:32).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS—

- 1) *Why are these riddles so difficult to understand?*
- 2) *What is the point made with the illustration of the leech's daughters (30:15)?*
- 3) *How are each of the four things mentioned never satisfied (30:15-16)?*
- 4) *What is the point about some things in nature being beyond our comprehension (30:18-19)?*
- 5) *Explain how those mentioned in 30:21-23 become unbearable.*
- 6) *Which is more important—wisdom or strength? How does the wise man emphasize that?*
- 7) *What is the lesson taught by each of the small animals mentioned?*
- 8) *Some things may be grand and beautiful, but should we boast of ourselves as such (30:29-32)?*