

Extremes

Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.
Proverbs 30:7-9

These requests of Agur reflect the common desire of mankind for convenience. From our modern vantage point, we can readily understand such desire. A man of Agur's time, evidently in or near the days of Solomon's reign, could hardly begin to imagine a fraction of the convenience that we enjoy in our times. Yet with all of the technological developments over these few thousand years, the extremes from which he requests deliverance continue to exist today. Fallen man is still prone to live in vanity and lies, and poverty and riches are still available for attaining. In verse nine, Agur expresses his reasons at least for avoiding the second set of extremes. His fear is that they might tempt him to sin by blaspheming the LORD God in his condition. He recognized that riches were as much, if not more, of a temptation to sin as poverty, but he also obviously knew the strength of temptation for the poor and hungry to regard the eighth commandment as vanity. Thus, he would rather live in the convenient state of the middle class, thinking it more conducive to uprightness.

Concerning his initial request to be far removed from vanity and lies, does he refer to those of others, or his own? If the former, does he also think that avoidance will guarantee escape from his own? While it is true that evil communications corrupt good manners, an axiom expounded with much variety in the balance of this book, we must also be aware that such avoidance doesn't exempt us from the bondage of our own corruption. Much more is needed.

Although in these seemingly reasonable requests we might agree to follow him, we must also be aware that simply the avoidance of the extremes of life is no guarantee of spiritual success. In fact, it is sometimes that such extremes are used of God to build the strength of faith needed for this life (e.g., Hebrews 11). It is difficult for a majority of us who enjoy the convenience of living far from extreme circumstances to understand the steadfast faith of our brethren throughout the world whose norm is to live in the extremes. They have learned that faith in the grace of God is far superior to Agur's scheme. May their example provoke us to walk and desire to learn the same.