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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham  
at Galeed Chapel Brighton  
on Sunday morning 31 August 1930

TEXT: PROVERBS 30 v 2,3 and 4

"Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man, I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy. Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? who hath gathered the wind in His fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is His Name, and what is His Son's Name, if thou canst tell?"

These are the words of Agur - some think that Agur is simply a symbolical name for Solomon - and he speaks to Ithiel, and Ucal - names representing persons unknown. Some think, because Ithiel means "God with me", and Ucal means "mighty", that Christ is intended. I am not of that judgement myself, because, if Solomon is the speaker, he does not give instruction to Christ; but that, so to speak, is a matter of indifference. We have before us this good man's confession, and also the questions, deep, and important, which he here asks. Having declared himself more brutish than any man, and destitute of the understanding of a man, he asks these great questions. "Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?" This acknowledged ignorance of Agur is very important, important respecting ourselves. Can we say it honestly? It must respect spiritual things; I think the context shows that. If Solomon is the speaker, he was the wisest man that ever lived, but here he comes to a strange acknowledgement of his ignorance, and I think this is by contrast. Contrasting himself, so to speak, with that glorious God of whom he speaks in the fourth verse, well might he say this - "I am more brutish than any man". Who, so ignorant of God? Who so blind respecting God? Do you feel it in regard to yourselves? It may also be by comparison. While you cannot compare yourself with God, you may compare yourself with a man, or with good men, and see how God teaches some, and how destitute you feel of that teaching, at any rate in

measure.

Let us look at this confessed ignorance. First, it belongs to the fall. It came to us by the fall. Sin blinded man, darkened his understanding, estranged him from God, brought him into that condition that, respecting God, it must be said of him, he has no understanding. God looked down from heaven among the children of men to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. (Psalm 14 v 2) This is the solemn sentence of God after, what one might call, His search. - There is none that understandeth; they have all gone out of the way, gone back. There is none that understandeth; no, not one. This universal ignorance now is wilful. We are wilfully blind. And if it were put to us, as Christ put the matter to people in the days of His flesh, we should say, as people then said - "Are we blind?" Do not we know this is universal? No sinful creature can say that by nature he knows God. Here I would make a remark that, however feebly I make it, is a tremendous weight in itself. In some creatures, sinful men, wilful blindness is followed in awful judgement by judicial blindness. God said to Isaiah - Go "make the heart of this people fat", shut their eyes. This is quoted by the Lord in the New Testament - Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and convert, and be healed. Could any judgement that God might send to us be so terrible as that? Could any temporal trouble, any bodily affliction, any circumstantial sorrow, be so awful as the judicial blindness that God sends on some people? Were you ever afraid of it? Did you ever fear that God, in judgement and punishment for your sins, and for punishment of your pride, would say, now that man shall be blinded by My judgement; that woman shall never have eyes to see, never have a heart to feel after Myself. Consider it my friends, consider the awfulness of it. Not only are you, by nature, blind, and deaf, and dumb with respect to God, but if He should say, that man is proud, that man despises Me, that man turns away from My Scriptures; that woman does the same; now, Holy Ghost never go to them, breathe no life into their souls, shed no light in their understandings; that is how God hardens people. May the Lord harden none of us. But the ignorance of the text confessed is not this alone. It is an ignorance perceived, mourned, confessed. O sinner is that you? Do you kneel before the Lord and say - "Lighten mine eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death". Do you go to Him in that

way? Lighten mine eyes with divine light lest I sleep the sleep of death, spiritual death. Do you ask Him to teach you. "That which I see not teach Thou me". Do you ask Him to penetrate the darkness, that you may have an understanding in the word, Jesus Christ, in John's gospel. "The light shineth in darkness". And O, say you, in prayer, Let that light shine into my dark heart, and my dark understanding, that I may have the true light of life; that that may be true of me that the Apostle speaks to the Ephesians - "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord." He said the same to the Thessalonians - "Ye are the children of light and of the day". "The true light now shineth", the light of truth in Christ, the light of truth in the Scriptures, the light of truth in God's nature. This is a confessed ignorance, a mourned ignorance. Happy the man who can unite with Agur in this - "I am more brutish than any man"; nobody so ignorant of God. The most learned man in the world in respect of science, and all things naturally, if God were to shine into his understanding and show him his condition in Adam and in himself, he would use this language, and honestly say - "I am more brutish than any man". And if he met a ploughman who knew God, O, he would say, this man is before me; he knows what I do not know. God's teaching makes wise, but it makes men wise to know themselves to be fools. "If any man will be wise in this world let him become a fool that he may be wise." Let his brain go, so to speak; let all his acquirements go; let all his attainments, let all his scholarship, go. He must just come to this, he is a sinner, he is foolish, he is brutish in his knowledge, as Jeremiah says - "Every man is brutish by his knowledge" (Jeremiah 51 v 17) - and he must just be an ignorant, foolish, dead thing in himself, that Christ may give him light. This is very solemn, very sobering, very humiliating, that a man must come down to be a bit of dust, and, worse than that, to be just pollution, and blindness, and sin. O, but does not this fit him for teaching, and for mercy? O, it does fit him for God, a good, a gracious, a merciful God. As God helps me I will trample on human nature, and I will do it in the pulpit, but I will do this also, by His help, I will lift up One who is better, gracious, merciful, and who says - "All my words are plain to him that understandeth, and right to them that find knowledge". What is this understanding? It is the understanding of faith. "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God". Through faith we receive Jesus Christ. Through faith we keep the

Passover. Through faith we fear not the wrath of the king, whatever he may be, wherever he may be. Through faith. Through faith we pray; through faith we go to Christ. Through faith we receive His righteousness for our covering, and His blood for our cleansing, and His Spirit for our Teacher. So a brutish man in respect of knowledge of God needs not to despair. No need for despair here. "Learn of Me" said the Lord Jesus "for I am meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls". "Learn of Me." You have learnt of men, now learn of Me. You have learnt this, and you have learnt that, and you understand the other thing in nature; now "Learn of Me" I came from heaven to do My Father's will. I came from heaven to seek and to save that which was lost. I came to give My life a ransom for many. "Learn of Me". Learn of grace to save a sinner. So a man cannot despair when the gospel is preached to him. It tells him who God is, and what He came to do.

"I have not the understanding of a man", but he may have the understanding of a saint. He may understand a little of Christ, why that Name is given to Him. He may understand the Name of Jesus. He may understand the Name, the blessed Name of the Mediator, and the Intercessor, the Redeemer. It is very wonderful how a person, naturally ignorant, even illiterate, is taught by the Holy Spirit, and he exemplifies that Scripture in the Proverbs - The heart of a man addeth learning to his lips - (Proverbs 16 v 23) so that an illiterate person may say things about God that no learned man can at all understand. It is good when God in His providence brings a person, a child of His, into such a condition as that he learns, and enters into, the original languages in which the Bible was written, but it is not necessary to salvation. If you get the nugget, the gold of divine teaching in your souls, that is true wealth. You may not have understanding, natural language, to beat that nugget out into gold leaf. Never mind that. If you have grace, you have eternal life. Sometimes men understand the Scriptures. Christ told His enemies that they did not understand the Scriptures, nor the power of God, yet they had the Scriptures in their hands. The doctors, and the Pharisees, and the scribes, and the Sadducees, they all could read the roll, the Holy Scripture then extant, but they did not understand them. They read of Christ and did not know Him. Now a poor sinner kneels before God, and sincerely says, Lord I do want to know Thee if

I may; I do want to know the Trinity if I may; - the question is not can I, but may I, know God; not, can I attain to this, can I acquire this, but may the knowledge be given to me. What is this knowledge, the knowledge of God? What is the knowledge of God? Eternal life; eternal life. O what knowledge does. It affects the understanding. It touches the heart's affections. It moves the will. It sets the soul moving after God. Yes, if you know your ruin, and have an understanding in God's mercy, that knowledge will set you moving after Him, will give you a sympathy with the Psalmist who said - "My soul followeth hard after God". It is a beautiful word - "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord." The darkness of sin, now you are in the light of grace. The darkness of your filthy garments, now you are in the light of justification. The darkness of alienation, now you are in the light of reconciliation. You may not be enjoying all that light discovers to you, but you are in the light. You are children of the light and of the day and not of the night and darkness. Is not that wonderful? See if you can honestly take that confession into your lips, and adopt it as your own painful experience. This will follow, you will have God for your teacher, and "Who teacheth like Him?"

"I neither learned wisdom". If Solomon be the speaker, this must be taken to represent spiritual wisdom, for he was the wisest man in the earth. God gave him an understanding and wisdom that he might rule. "I neither learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy". This may be by comparison. You may take Dr Goodwin, and read some of his works; Dr Owen and read his writings; William Huntington, and John Warburton, and others, and say, we do not know what such men knew. A minister may read one of those men, and say, Why all preaching is knocked out of me; I have no knowledge to preach such as they did. By comparison we may say that we are in this condition. "I neither learned wisdom nor have the knowledge of the holy" What the holy people learnt, I have not attained to. Who are the holy people? God's people. "Holy brethren partakers of the heavenly calling" How do they get their knowledge? By divine teaching. By that teaching that will give it to you, to me. That Holy Spirit who is given to teach and to bring to sinners the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And it may be an encouragement to us to consider that a person under divine teaching only knows what God teaches him, and the man who has

the most has very little compared with what he is to have. Bless God that He acknowledges what He gives to His people. Now if we have a little, and, by comparison, are sometimes tempted to think we have nothing, yet may we be enabled to hold fast to this. Who teacheth like God? And He can make us understand. The bright inshining of Christ, who came as "A light into the world, that whosoever believeth in Him should not abide in darkness" will give a man real understanding, and impart to him the knowledge of the holy. Therefore there is no reason for any poor, mourning, distressed, and sensibly ignorant person here, kneeling at times before God, and saying, do condescend to teach me, that he should give way to despair. Remember that spiritual knowledge is not a matter of acquisition, but of revelation. A gift, not a work. What made the Jews fail all the time they were seeking to establish their own righteousness? They must have felt their righteousness to be rickety, weak, but, not knowing a better righteousness, they went about in their services, and their doings, to establish that rickety righteousness and they never attained to righteousness. What made the Gentiles, who did not so live, attain to righteousness? Faith. God gave them faith, and they attained to righteousness, received it into their souls. It became their robe. Christ became the end of the law to them for righteousness, that the whole of the law was fulfilled in them who walked not after the flesh but after the Spirit. So, while trying to keep this before you, that it is a good thing to feel ignorant, and it may be profitable sometimes to make a comparison, still in the other case, and in both cases, there is no reason for despair. A sinner, sensible of his ignorance, has a throne of grace open to him, and the invitation is given to him - "Come boldly to the throne of grace". Come to Christ, and He will save you. This is the way God leads His people.

We reach the question - "Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?" who hath gathered the wind in His fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is His Name, and what is His Son's Name if thou canst tell?" Keep silence all the ends of the earth when God speaks. What questions! If questions about men are put, men can answer them. If questions about this science, and that science be put, men can answer them. But when questions of Deity, when questions respecting "I AM

THAT I AM",and questions respecting His awful sovereignty in operation, who can answer them? O,I wish that we, as a congregation, might have grace to fall flat on our faces, and confess that we know nothing except as God teaches us, and the great matter is this, to know God. You might not have much religion, but if you know God, that is the point. You may feel more sin, and feel sin more, and more, but if you know God, that is the point. Is He knowable? Can ignorant men attain to a knowledge of Him? Yes. He is knowable, and men, however blind they are by nature, can attain to the knowledge of Him. How can this be? Because He that ascended up into heaven is the same who descended into the lower parts of the earth, as Paul teaches concerning Christ. What did He descend for? To give that life that God gave Him, and commanded Him to lay down. To bring in that righteousness which alone can satisfy divine justice, and an enlightened conscience. This is He who ascended up into heaven, having come down from heaven. This is spoken of Christ - "I am come" He said "a light into the world", and if you see Him in His Own light, you will understand a little about Him. If you see Him simply as a great historical Person, if you see Him in the light of the Scriptures only; if you see Him in the light of history; then you wont see Him. "Seeing they might not see". But if you see Him in those beautiful, those penetrating, those soft, those softening rays of divine illumination, then you will see Him. Remember the day, said the Apostle to the Hebrews, in which you were illuminated. "Illuminated", what a word! That God sends His light into a blind eye, into a darkened understanding, and if the question then be put to you - "Who hath ascended up into heaven or descended?" you would say, I believe that is Jesus Christ. And you would see, in His light, what He came to do. "The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost". And the light would so affect your heart, as to make you cry, Lord, I am lost, save me. I am distant, bring me near. I have nothing but filthy rags, O give me Thy righteousness. I am weakness itself because sin in me is strong; O be Thou the strength of God to me. I am polluted, O wash me in Thy precious blood. "Who hath ascended up into heaven?" Who descended? Jesus Christ. "I came from My Father" He said to His disciples, and I return to My Father. I came from God and I go back to Him. So, dear friends, have we this knowledge? Can we answer, humbly answer, this question - "Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended?" Where did He go to? The lowest part of the

earth; even to the grave. He died, He gave up the ghost, He voluntarily died. Immortal, because sinless, He gave Himself because He had a commandment from His Father to lay His life down. He had love to His people to lay it down. He had grace given to Him to save His people, and He laid down His life. Then He was buried, and with His burial were all the hopes of His poor disciples seemingly buried also. He rose again the third day. This descending Saviour, descending into the grave, rose again the third day. And, having shown Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, He ascended into heaven. He is there. Whether you see Him or not, whether you desire to see Him or not, He is there

The same dear Man in heaven now reigns  
Who suffered for our sake

O, honours rest on Him. When you read, as you do sometimes doubtless, that on His head are many crowns, can you say, have you said, in your hearts - Lord, do permit, do teach us to put another crown on Thy adorable brow. He is worthy, He is worthy. Salvation, O joyful sound. Why sinner, if you were at the gates of hell, if you felt the pains of hell gat hold on you more and more strongly, if you felt the wrath of God more and more distinctly, and powerfully, and terribly poured into your conscience, a sight of Him who ascended up into heaven after He had descended, would cause you to say to your soul - "Hope thou in God". Hope in God, He is the hope of Israel. He is the Saviour thereof in time of trouble. Hope in His blood; hope in His righteousness; hope in His intercession - "Hope thou in God". So some people can humbly, reverently, believingly answer the question - "Who hath ascended up into heaven?" Bless God if you have got the answer. Bless God if you can say, I believe that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, that He was dead, that He was buried, that He rose again, that He ascended up on high; that when He ascended up on high He led captivity captive. And perhaps, gazing on Him by faith, as a mighty conqueror, you may pray to Him occasionally, and say, Lord Jesus bring into captivity every thought of my heart to Thyself.

Now I wont keep you longer this morning. You have been perfectly still, notwithstanding the great, and oppressive heat. Now let us

depart, seeking the favour of God to go with us to our homes.

AMEN.