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HIDE YOUR SINS

Have you ever done something and tried to cover it up? It seems a natural and common thing to do. The main character of Poe's "The Black Cat" tries to cover up his crime by hiding the victim behind a wall. In mysteries, bodies turn up under floors, in lakes or rivers, buried, cut up, or burned. Children hide things under the mattress or in the bottom of the toy box, or wash the chocolate off their faces (the only time they touch soap willingly).

Perhaps we come by that tendency naturally. After all, it can be traced back to our original ancestors.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:6-8)

Of course, as so often happens when we try to cover something up, it didn't work. Adam, himself, showed his own guilt. "And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked?" (verses 9-11)

At this time of the year, though, many people are looking forward to a legitimate hiding of their sins. *Yom Kippur* (October 2 in 2006) is often translated as the Day of Atonement, but it is just as proper to call it the Day of Hiding. When the Temple was standing sacrifices were made annually for the covering of sin.

This was a unique concept among religions. Many religions emphasize social justice, doing good rather than harm. With some there is no provision to cover harm done. With others the good and bad are weighed at death, and if the bad outweighs the good it results in either annihilation or reincarnation in a "lesser" form. Sin, if there is any concept of such, can never be truly covered.

Our God, on the other hand, provides for a true covering of sin, and that in this lifetime. His people do not

have to wait for death to cover their sins. For the repentant, that covering is present and complete.

If that covering was afforded first to the Jewish people on *Yom Kippur*, it is afforded now for all people through another blood sacrifice. This sacrifice is even more complete because it does not have to be offered annually.

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, ... Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:11-14)

Several things can be noted about this passage. Contrary to the belief of many Christian preachers, the sacrifice of bulls and goats was fully effective to cover sin completely and forever. The greater sacrifice, however, was more effective because it was more personal. The Messiah offered his own blood. As with the animal sacrifice, though, that blood had to be (and was) "without spot." Lastly, the covering of sin offered through the Messiah not only covers the sin but also the consciousness of sin.

A day, a year, a lifetime of hiding sin. That is what everyone faces. The important question is, who will do the hiding? Will it be you, or will it be God? Therein is all the difference. Therein is all the hope.

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THREE, AND FOUR

Who wrote the book of Proverbs? Most people, if they can answer at all, would say that Solomon wrote the book. In that they are partially right. Most of the book was Solomon's, but the latter chapters have other authors. The last chapter was penned by a "king Lemuel," with no other indication of who he was or over whom he was king. The penultimate chapter is attributed to one "Agur, the son of Jakeh," a prophet. He was a remarkable poet, in the styles of Hebrew poetry, whose signature phrase seems to be "so many, and one more."

Insatiable

Three times Agur tells of three things, and a fourth. One time he lists a straight four without his signature phrasing.

The first of these groups is things that are "never satisfied." They consist of "the grave; and the barren womb; the earth that is not filled with water; and the fire that saith not, It is enough." (Prov 30:16)

Years ago I was in charge of a military funeral detail. We only did funerals on Mondays; other bases had the responsibility for other days. In three months I must

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have visited most of the cemeteries in San Diego, including some that most people did not know existed. There was hardly a Monday that we had no funerals, and several in which we had three or four. Multiply that by seven days and keep in mind that military funerals are only a fraction of all funerals on a given day, and it is easy to see that the grave is never satisfied. People die. More importantly, I am going to die. How I react to the promise that the grave is insatiable will make all the difference in how I live.

The Bible tells of at least three women who were barren. One, Sarah, had so far given up hope of satisfaction, at age ninety, that she laughed when told she would finally bear a child. (Gen 18) Elizabeth was old, but probably not so old as Sarah (Lk 2). A long time she had prayed for a child, but none was given to her until the right time for the forerunner of the Messiah to appear. Hanna was another to whom Agur

referred. She was barren, but not satisfied (1 Sam 1). She prayed so earnestly that the priest even thought she was drunk. Until God answered that prayer, Hannah was not satisfied. These women, who unexpectedly received satisfaction, prove Agur's statement about the barren womb.

New Mexico and Arizona are in a desert. For several years now, we have been in a drought, although this year it was a very wet drought. In many places a person can go out shortly after a rainstorm and find little evidence that it had rained. The ground is so dry that it absorbs the moisture quickly and completely. This is even more true of the Atacama Desert of Chile, places in which have never seen rain. Perhaps Agur had seen Egypt a few hundred yards away from the Nile. Some land is never satisfied with the water it gets. Some people are never satisfied with the blessings rained on them.

The "one more" is the fire. As I write this a wildfire is burning thousands of acres in California. Soon there will be fires all over the Western United States. The only way to stop these fires is to starve them. Starve them of heat, of fuel, or of oxygen. The problem with wildfires is that it is difficult to take away one of these. As long as they are present, the fire is insatiable. "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell." (Jas 3:6) Unless we remove the fuel, smother the urge, gossip and *lashon hara* (evil speaking) will consume us. There is always a market for such speech. Like the fire, people who enjoy that never say "enough."

It is understandable that Agur would mention these four things after a verse about the leech always wanting "more, more." But what do these insatiable things have to do with the following verse? "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." Perhaps he is saying that the rebellious child is like these other things. Rebelliousness in a child feeds itself. No matter what the parents do, no matter how much they show they love him, he desires more "freedom." Mockery, like other evil speech, breeds more mockery. When one gets away with it, it is never satisfied.

Wonderful

The next grouping are things "too wonderful for me." These are "the way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid."

An eagle in the air, a snake on the rock; who can predict where they are going? Even today people spend a

lifetime trying to understand flight, or the farsightedness of the eagle. Herpetologists handle snakes with extreme care, because they know how unpredictable they can be. Understanding animals is not easy.

I spent months on board ships. I took courses in navigation, studied propulsion systems, watched shiphandlers. I know, and taught, firefighting and emergency repair. I have been in places in ships that many people did not know there were places. And yet, there is much I don't know about the way of a ship in the midst of the sea. To someone who lives his life on land, the way of a ship must be even more of a mystery.

Who can understand the attraction between a boy and a girl, a youth and a maid? How many books have been written about young love, and still parents wonder what their son sees in a girl, or what a daughter sees in a boy. Of all these mysteries, to a parent this is possibly the most mysterious.

As wonderful as these things are, Agur says that they are no more wonderful than an adulteress. Adulteresses (and adulterers) are good at justifying their sin. "My spouse doesn't understand me, satisfy me, communicate with me. This new person is my soul-mate. It was a mistake to have married in the first place." They convince themselves that they are not in the wrong. But then, adulteresses are no different than any other practitioners of sin in this respect. Don't we all find ways to justify our pet sins? Can't we explain away any conscientious objection? In all this, an outside observer asks, "how can he think he is innocent?"

Disquiet

A third group of four are those things at which "the earth is disquieted." These are things that seem contradictory to good practice. As one of my coworkers is prone to put it, "that's just wrong." These things are "a servant when he reigneth; and a fool when he is filled with meat; For an odious woman when she is married; and an handmaid that is heir to her mistress."

Most of us can probably understand the wrongness of a servant becoming a king or a handmaid being the heir of her mistress. The temptation to hurry the inheritance along is great. The tendency of a servant is against rule. Historian Bruce Catton has proposed that one reason career military men traditionally have been bad Presidents of the United States is that they are used to taking orders from Congress, not giving them. A fool when he is filled may be a little harder to understand. Oftentimes what keeps a foolish person in check is a lack of opportunity or the intrusion of priority needs. Once he is full of what he needs, then he has opportunity to get into trouble. Any henpecked husband knows the wrongness of a domineering woman.

To a ruler, all of these four things indicate a fundamental wrongness with the proper order of things. In America we may pretend that we don't have these prejudices, but they are still there. There is always danger in the oppressed becoming the oppressor. It is a natural tendency, but it is still disquieting even to those who pretend equality.

Comely

Agur's final group of three plus one is that of things which go well. Some of these we may not fully understand, living in a different time and place. They are "a lion which is strongest among beasts, and turneth not away for any; A greyhound; an he goat also; and a king, against whom there is no rising up."

I don't go to greyhound races. I see no appeal in them, as compared to horse races. Yet I do recognize the grace of a greyhound at speed. Regardless of the cruelty used to get them to run, when they are running there is little that has more grace or speed. Just as I don't understand the appeal of dog races, I don't understand the appeal of a he goat to Agur. And yet, the alpha male goat

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gets his way. He may be challenged, but he is not defeated.

The lion and the king also brook no opposition. Nobody turns them aside. Everyone gives way. Agur says that these four things go well and are comely; however he draws an opposite lesson from them.

The lion and the greyhound, the king and the goat, all get their way in their pride. (No pun intended in the case of the lion.) Their way may appear desirable. The conclusion of the matter, though, is "If thou hast done foolishly in lifting up thyself, or if thou hast thought evil, lay thine hand upon thy mouth." The ways of these things may appear good, but if by following them you emulate their pride, beware. If you are brought to think evil, that your way may go easily, then cover your mouth, that the evil may be stifled. Some things may appear to us to be desirable, yet their ways are the paths of destruction.

Agur draws lessons from these groups of three plus one. Three things are good to know; yea, four are of great value. These are the sayings of Agur. Learn from him.

WANDERING ABRAHAM

The Jewish people have long been used to being a homeless nation. Even when they had a home it had a history of being conquered—by the Philistines, the Midianites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans. Even the great fall feast, Succoth (the Feast of Booths which begins on October 7 this year) is a reminder of forty years wandering in the desert.

In a way this makes a little sense. After all, the father of the Jewish nation was Abraham. Legend says that Abraham's father moved the family to Haran because the young Abram had called down the wrath of the leaders of Ur when he smashed up his father's idol shop. Whatever the reason, early in his life he moved from his home. When he was seventy-five years old God told him, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee." (Gen 12:1) From that time he became a man with no settled home. He moved around in the land to which he went, and even had to leave that land at times. Abraham was a man without a permanent home.

One of the early Christian writers, most probably a rabbi, made a *drash* (a lesson in which the writer draws a conclusion which may not be in the simple reading of the text) on Abraham's wanderings. "By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." He goes on to say that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare

plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

When God gave the commandment for Israel to dwell in booths during this feast, he gave the reason, "That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Lev 23:43) What does dwelling in booths at that time have to do with God being "the LORD your God?" Might it not be the same thought given about Abraham?

Abraham knew that his home was beyond this life, because his God is not limited to this life. As God led Israel to the land which Abraham had inhabited they dwelt in tents. Even after entering the land they were to remember this. The lesson of Abraham and Israel is that this life is not permanent. We are merely on a journey to the land which is to be. Abraham knew that no matter how long he lived on the land in Canaan, that was a short path to home with God. He lived in tents, but even the tent of his body was temporary.

During the feast of booths, the observant live in a *sukka*, a temporary hut, only one side of which can be a permanent wall. It is built just for the holiday and then torn down. In a sense, our lives last no longer than a *sukka* during the feast; we are here a week and then torn down. Like Abraham, though, we need to be looking forward to a permanent home, not to the present which lasts only for today.

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