

# A Woman to be Praised

Proverbs 31:10-31 on August 23, 2020  
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Please read Proverbs 31:10-31 before going further in this transcript.

Today marks week #11 in our summer series on Proverbs. This will be sermon #11 out of 11. Next Sunday we're looking forward to hearing from Mark Little Elk, who will bring us a powerful message on trusting God through suffering. The week after that we'll hear from Matt Graf on the topic of patience. In fact, his sermon has an intriguing title, "Patience Often Feels Like Death." You won't want to miss either of these sermons.

Well, as we've said many times now, Proverbs is a book of Wisdom and Warnings. Today's wisdom and warnings, are regarding how to find a wife of noble character. To fully appreciate the message of vv. 10-31, it helps for all of us to put ourselves in the shoes of a man who is looking for a godly wife.<sup>1</sup> But if we're not a man, or if we're not looking for a spouse, that doesn't mean that this passage doesn't have something to teach us. Proverbs 31 is written from a vantage point that makes it easiest for single men, who are looking for a good wife, to gain wisdom. But it's also relatively easy for single women, who are looking for a good husband, to gain wisdom from Proverbs 31. These verses are also easily applicable, to those of us who may be ADVISING someone else, who is in this situation. For example, you might be a parent or a mentor or a friend of someone, and have the opportunity to speak wisdom into their search for a godly spouse. But even beyond these easier applications, ALL of us, should ALWAYS be watching for wisdom along the way, whenever we read ANY part of God's Word. Today, God's Word wants to teach ALL of us about godliness, through the tangible example of a godly woman, "a woman to be praised."

Proverbs 31:10-31 is an acrostic poem. This means that each verse begins "with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet." In other words, Proverbs 31 describes a godly wife from A to Z. Or, as the Hebrew people might say, from Aleph<sup>2</sup> (א) to Tav (ת). So, the 22 consonants that make up the Hebrew alphabet, successively begin these 22 verses. In other words, Proverbs 31 is giving a fairly comprehensive and thorough description of an ideal, godly wife.<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 31 begins by declaring that **a godly woman can be recognized by...**

**1 Her noble character.** Proverbs 31:10 asks, "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies." Right out of the gate, we are told to look for CHARACTER. Not physical beauty or charm, not a pretty smile, or a valuable dowry, but CHARACTER. If we are able to find this kind of a woman, she will be worth FAR MORE than rubies.<sup>4</sup> A godly woman is the kind of woman we should be looking for. Her value is MUCH more than skin deep. Later on, Proverbs 31:30 gives this warning, "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." The fact is, the only mention of physical attractiveness in Proverbs 31 is in verse 30, which serves as a WARNING not to get sidetracked from the most important thing that we should be looking for: the fear of the LORD.<sup>5</sup> Now, it would be inaccurate and disingenuous to suggest that physical attraction is a nonfactor in marriage. Given the physical nature of marital love, it's important to have a certain level of physical attraction to our spouse. It's just that wisdom warns us not to make that our PRIMARY or ONLY factor for choosing a good spouse.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, in many Hebrew Bibles, the OT book

<sup>1</sup> See discussion by Tremper Longman III in *Proverbs: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 72-74, "Gender and the Theology."

<sup>2</sup> AH lif and Tav (claw)

<sup>3</sup> And once we know what to look for, we need to diligently and patiently search for her. And when we do eventually find her and marry her, we'll find ourselves blessed by her godly character.

<sup>4</sup> Men, don't fall for the world's definition of attractiveness. Don't settle for physical beauty alone. Don't fall for charming flirtations or be trapped by the lure of her financial wealth, or whatever else it may be. Don't even settle for the simple idea of finding someone who will "MAKE you happy." Rather, find someone who shows signs of noble character. This is the kind of person that you'll want by your side when the going gets tough, the kind of person who will stick by you until death do you part.

<sup>5</sup> The only other possible reference to her sexual appeal might be in verse 22, "She makes coverings for her bed...." Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 541.

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs is warning us that initial charms can be misleading. As quickly as charm can be turned on, it can be turned off. Proverbs is warning us that if physical beauty is our primary motivation for pursuing a relationship, that physical beauty will wane over the years. If your attraction is only skin deep,

of Ruth follows immediately after Proverbs 31.<sup>7</sup> Ruth is described this way in Ruth 3:11: "...All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character." Everybody knows it; it's obvious. Ruth was recognized by her noble character.

Proverbs 31:11 goes on, "Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value." The *English Standard Version* translates this more literally, "The heart of her husband trusts in her..." If you are a single guy, and you're looking for a good wife, find a woman that you can TRUST with your heart. Proverbs 4:23 warns us to guard our hearts, because everything we do flows from our heart. Proverbs 31:11 declares that a man can TRUST a noble woman with his heart. He can have "FULL confidence in her." Notice the intense vulnerability here. Believe me men, your most vulnerable, inner self is not something that quickly or easily recovers, when it is betrayed or belittled by a woman who does not have noble character. And let's be clear, this goes both ways. Believe me women, when you decide to entrust a man with your most vulnerable, inner self, you'll want to be certain that he is a man of noble character.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, what we're learning about here, in Proverbs 31, is the importance of matching up a godly man with a godly woman.<sup>9</sup> In this way they can both enjoy a "robust spiritual relationship" that impacts all of their days together.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to what we've already learned from verses 10-11, we're about to learn, that a godly marriage remains strong and healthy, when it's based on more than just physical or emotional attraction. And EVEN on more than just a spiritual union. A strong/healthy marriage is two people sharing a broad range of experiences and challenges. This requires a relationship that is intellectual, entrepreneurial, and exceedingly practical. It's why we so often hear wedding vows that talk about: "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health," and only then do we include the words: "to love and to cherish." By the way, just as a side note, it's important that we acknowledge that not everyone NEEDS to get married, or even WANTS to get married. Proverbs 31 uses the husband/wife scenario to illustrate what godliness looks like, but that doesn't mean the only way for a person to be godly is to get married. There are multiple passages in the Bible that talk about the high and noble calling of remaining single.<sup>11</sup> We can serve God just as well as a single person, arguably even better than a married person. So please don't take Proverbs 31 as a directive, that everyone needs to run out and get married as soon as possible. Well, Proverbs 31 not only talks about noble character, but it also talks about another way, that a godly woman can be recognized. A godly woman can be recognized by...

**2 Her selfless hard work.** Her work ethic is explained in quite some detail in verses 13-27. Proverbs 31:15 says, "She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants." She gets up early.<sup>12</sup> She's NOT like the slackers or sluggards that are mentioned earlier in the book of Proverbs.<sup>13</sup> She not only feeds her own family, but she selflessly provides food for her servants as well. In other words, rather than lying in bed and waiting for her servants to bring her breakfast, SHE gets THEIR breakfast ready.<sup>14</sup>

Proverbs 31:16 says, "She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard." In other words, she's a business woman.<sup>15</sup> It's pretty interesting to read this description,

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what will hold your marriage together as that beauty fades? **Obviously, a woman who fears the LORD can be both charming and beautiful, but she will be recognized by her noble character.**

<sup>7</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1257 footnote on Proverbs 31:10-31.

<sup>8</sup> This is why Proverbs 31:12 goes on to say, "She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life." As obvious and simple as this may sound, verse 12 states it plainly, spouses should bring each other good, not harm, all the days of their lives. This doesn't mean that either spouse will ever be perfect, but it does mean that the general direction of the relationship will be positive. It should go w/o saying (and yet Proverbs says it), but godly spouses lovingly avoid things that bring injury or insult to each other.

<sup>9</sup> Consider the warning about an unequal match (or yoke) in 2 Corinthians 6:14.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, NICOT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, p. 521.

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 and Matthew 19:12.

<sup>12</sup> Verse 13 shows that she's not just willing to work, but she's eager.

<sup>13</sup> Proverbs 31:18 makes an interesting comment, "...her lamp does not go out at night." Now, I always thought that this meant that she worked late into the night. But some Bible commentators have suggested a different explanation. There's an interesting footnote in the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* that explains this doesn't mean that she works all night long. Instead, having a lamp burning all night long, "signifies her wealth." In other words, verse 18 is saying that her home is well provided for and that all is well in the home because she is making a good profit from business in trading. See the helpful footnote on Proverbs 31:18, p. 1257, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015. See also Proverbs 13:9 and 20:20.

<sup>14</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1257 footnote on Proverbs 31:15. This makes me think of the comedy by Shakespeare, "The Taming of the Shrew" and the old film "Kiss Me, Kate."

<sup>15</sup> Proverbs 19:14 says, "Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD."

written some 3,000 years ago, in a cultural setting where men and women had some pretty distinct and differing roles. This is an informative picture for us from God's Word. It may help some of us to reframe our potential assumptions and stereotypes about the roles of men and women. These verses reveal not only just how much women are truly CAPABLE of, but also how noble it is for women to do MORE than just look pretty and keep the house clean.<sup>16</sup>

Proverbs 31:20 says, "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy." In other words, all of this money that she is making is not just for herself and her own family. She is selfless and she shares her wealth with those who have less than her. There's a servanthood that drives her activities.<sup>17</sup>

Proverbs 31:23 says, "Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land."<sup>18</sup> Here Proverbs is hinting at how each spouse's reputation enhances and supports the others. In fact, when we get to the very end, v. 31 will mention that she should be praised at the city gate. The city gate is "where the leaders of the city met to hold court and where the marketplace was located. In other words, her husband is respected at the city gate... and so is she. This is about their mutual presence and reputation in the community. Verse 23 clarifies that her husband has a seat on the community's Elder Board. Interestingly enough, the NT book of 1 Timothy makes specific references, to how godly marriages and families are a pre-requisite for Elder/Deacon leadership within the church.<sup>19</sup>

Proverbs 31:25 says, "She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come." In other words, "she is free of anxiety and worry."<sup>20</sup> All the energy that she is spending on caring for her home and family, as well as running a business and helping the poor, is not motivated by stress or worry. Do you know why she can laugh at the future rather than fret about it?<sup>21</sup> It's not overconfidence or cockiness; it's because her noble character and her selfless hard work are motivated, by her fear of the Lord. Wise living has resulted in stability and peace of mind. She's wisely pursued a stable home and a good life for her and her family. She's not bragging, but she is enjoying the fruit of her godly behavior and godly character.<sup>22</sup> This brings Matthew 6:33 to mind, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."<sup>23</sup>

Verse 26 tells us she is also a good teacher. "Faithful instruction is on her tongue." At this point, one can't help wondering, wow! is there ANYTHING this woman CAN'T do!!? If I were a woman, at this point in Proverbs 31, I'd be feeling pretty intimidated by this "wife of noble character." Proverbs lays out quite a portrait of this woman who is: educated, competent, responsible, strong, selfless, hard-working, and God-fearing. This feels like an awful LOT to live up to! Author Tremper Longman notes that Proverbs 31 "describes an unbelievably energetic and competent woman... the qualities and abilities of this woman make one wonder whether the proper answer to the opening question, 'A noble woman, who can find?' is 'No one, because she doesn't exist'... The description is an ideal and should not be used as a standard by which to measure and critique women."<sup>24</sup> In other words, while Proverbs 31 is certainly an admirable target to aim for, it is NOT meant to discourage or exasperate women by pressuring them to be PERFECT. Let's all keep in mind, that godliness is a life-long process for every Christ-follower. For women AND for men, becoming a fully devoted follower of

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<sup>16</sup> This isn't to say that looking pretty is bad, or that keeping the house clean and taking care of the kids is in any way unimportant. It's just to say that we should notice that the Old Testament Scriptures give a fairly expansive view of the role and capabilities of women. Verse 17 goes on to explain that she works vigorously, that her arms are strong. So here we see that hard, physical labor and the physical strength needed for it, is not necessarily always reserved for men.

<sup>17</sup> Verse 21 explains that she's prepared for the cold winter well in advance. She's a planner and a preparer.

<sup>18</sup> This is one of the 3 times that her husband is mentioned in Proverbs 31: Her husband has full confidence in her (11), her husband is respected (23), and her husband praises her (28).

<sup>19</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:1-13, especially verses 2, 4-5, 7, 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1078 footnote on Proverbs 31:25.

<sup>21</sup> Consider Matthew 6:25-33.

<sup>22</sup> Proverbs 31:27 says that "She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness." So, even though verse 25 says that she is not worried about the future, that doesn't mean she doesn't keep a close watch over her household and other responsibilities.

<sup>23</sup> Read the full context of Matthew 10:26-31. When someone genuinely fears the LORD, they needn't have fear of anything else. In other words, godliness has led her to a happy and fulfilled life.

<sup>24</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, p. 540.

Jesus, means that we are ALL, a work in progress. So, let me encourage you ladies, please don't get discouraged by this highly idealized description in Proverbs 31.

If any of us are feeling like we don't measure up to the godly standards laid out for us in Proverbs 31, or in any other part of God's Word for that matter, let's ALL keep in mind that godliness takes a lifetime of learning and growing. Even MORE importantly, let's ALL keep in mind that God's Word teaches us, that there is no one righteous, not one.<sup>25</sup> As Christ-followers, we are completely dependent on the righteousness of Christ, not our own efforts to be righteous.<sup>26</sup> In Philippians 3:9 Paul explains his desire to "...be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith." Well let's wrap up, by looking at the last few verses of Proverbs 31. A godly woman can be recognized by...

**3 Her fear of the LORD, which results in praise.** Proverbs 31:28 says, "Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her." We get a picture of the family standing up when she enters the room. Her husband is proud of her, and not only is he proud of her but he communicates that message to her, in front of the kids! If you are a married man, when is the last time you praised your wife? Do you ever stand up when she enters the room and declare her praises in front of your children? If the last time we did this was Mother's Day or our wedding Anniversary, we may want to consider making this a more common practice. God's Word gives us a model to follow here. Let's do this because it honors God but also as an example and a testimony, to the unmarried men/women around us. Then they will come to believe and understand, that the kind of wife that a man truly wants and NEEDS, is a woman of noble character and selfless hard work; a woman who fears the LORD.

Proverbs 31:29 says, "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." This is actually the crescendo of this poem.<sup>27</sup> It answers the initial question from verse 10, "A wife of noble character who can find?" The words of verse 29 are being spoken out loud by her husband. He says this right in front of their children, "I found her!" If you are a married man, I urge you to talk to your wives this way: "There are a lot of other women out there Honey, but YOU surpass them all. You're my favorite. You're #1 in my book! 😊"

Proverbs 31:30-31 concludes, "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate." Here we are, at the end of this alphabetical poem, and there's still no appeal to her outward adornments or to her physical attributes. No mention of perfume, jewelry, hair style, having a nice body, etc.<sup>28</sup> The only mention is a warning about deceptive charm and fleeting beauty. In summary, Proverbs 31 flies in the face of the world's definition of an attractive woman.<sup>29</sup>

Let's close our series on the book of Proverbs, by reminding ourselves that "fearing the LORD," is not just an attribute for godly WOMEN. From the very beginning of the book, Proverbs is framed around ONE VERY important principle: Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."<sup>30</sup> The fear of the LORD, should lead EVERY Christ-follower, to wise living! So, Sister or Brother in Christ, let's live wisely in this world. Let's not foolishly despise wisdom and instruction. Rather, let's fear the LORD so that we can gain the knowledge that we need, for a good and God-honoring life.

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<sup>25</sup> See Romans 3:9-20.

<sup>26</sup> See Isaiah 61:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Titus 3:4-7.

<sup>27</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1078 footnote on Proverbs 31:29.

<sup>28</sup> Contrast this with the adulteress woman in Proverbs 5:3-4, "For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword."

<sup>29</sup> See 1 Peter 3:3-4; 1 Samuel 16:7; and 1 Timothy 2:9-10.

<sup>30</sup> The statement in verse 30 "...a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" forms the final book-end for the entire book of Proverbs.