

A Worthy Wife

Proverbs 31:10-31

Some Hebrew poetry comes in sets of 22 verses, like Psalm 119 and Lamentations. Proverbs 31: 10-31 is another one of them. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Such a poem is sometimes called an “acrostic.” Like rhyme in English poetry, this was partly a device to aid memorisation.

The book of Proverbs concludes with this wonderful epilogue. It honours the wife of noble character. This may seem a little surprising, given that the book of Proverbs is addressed to young men who are beginning to face mature life. Why describe a wife who has seen a good deal of life, raised a family, and has earned her husband’s unqualified praise? Several reasons can be given. Both Wisdom and Folly have been personified in the Book of Proverbs as women who coax young people to follow their ways and buy their wares. The noble wife demonstrates and summarises many of the qualities and values that Wisdom advertises. A young man ought to search out the personified Lady Wisdom, as the noble wife presents herself. Besides that, the section gives indirect advice to a young man about the kind of wife he should look for.

This noble woman fears the Lord. The theme of Proverbs is “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Prv 1:7) This noble wife loves and respects God, submits to His lordship, and believes His promises. Though wise believers admire Him and fear His threats, they also delight in Him.

Outside the context of the rest of Proverbs, what a splendid picture this is! Many people like to think of their own mothers or wives as this poem describes the worthy wife. She is more precious to her husband than rubies. Proverbs 18:22 said, “He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favour from the LORD.” She brings him good.

The picture comes from the days when garments were made at home, long before the industrial revolution. The wise woman begins at home with raw wool and raw flax, and she works them with eager hands. Her hands are skilled with the distaff and the spindle. Her family is not only clothed, but also well clothed. She makes coverings for her bed, and she dresses herself in fine linen and purple. She also makes linen garments for sale and supplies the merchants with sashes.

She is an enterprising woman, like the trading ships. She can see that her trading is profitable. She is the opposite of the slovenly person whom Proverbs describes in several places. She gets up while it is still dark, and provides food for her family and servants. Whereas the slovenly person’s garden is overgrown with thorns and weeds, she shows initiative and good judgment. She examines a field judiciously, buys it, and establishes a vineyard. Though that is a costly, labour-intensive enterprise, she does it all out of her earnings, and with an eye to the future.

The work she does has an effect on her. Her vigorous work has developed strong muscles in her arms. Lazy hands make a person poor, but she sets about her work with vigour. The fact that her trading is profitable means that even on the economic side she is worth more than rubies are.

Her lamp does not go out at night because she has thought ahead. She has planned effectively. Because of her wise forethought and hard work, she has no fears about her family when the snows of winter arrive. She can laugh at the days that are ahead. Her household does not merely run well because it is prosperous. The prosperity is the product of her care, useful work, and providence.

Her activity benefits people beyond her family. She is aware of the needs of the poor and needy, and helps them. Too often the needy are neglected because those who are able to help are not sensitive enough to notice their need, or too absorbed in their own affairs to consider others. Proverbs 14:21 said, “He who despises his neighbour sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.”

A noble woman is often to be found supporting a successful husband. The city gate was the place that

where legal decisions were made and business was done. The worthy wife's husband is well respected there. He takes his seat among the elders of the land.

Clothes do not make the man, or the woman, either. Charm can be deceptive, and beauty is fleeting. Job said, about every human being, "He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure." What makes this ideal woman noble is not her wardrobe, -but her strength and dignity.

Because she is wise, she gives wise advice. It is not mere worldly advice that she has gathered from experience. Because she fears the Lord, her instruction is faithful to His Word, and her advice is both wise and loving. Many people can attribute much that is worthwhile in their lives to the influence of their mothers. Proverbs 6:20 said, "My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching."

Some women are like empty boilers, full of angry wind. The children of the wife of noble character think of her as a person in happy circumstances, and one who radiates joy to others. Praise God if we can think of our mothers and wives like this!

When respect is ascribed, and people are required to show it when they do not really think it is warranted. Real respect is earned. That is evident in the concluding lines, "Her children have been standing up and calling her blessed; her husband also, and he has been praising her, by saying, "Many daughters have been doing noble work, but you have excelled all of them. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the LORD is the one to be praised. Give her what her hands have produced, and let her achievements praise her at the city gates."

May God grant that the Gospel of Christ may continue to motivate our mothers and wives to be like this noble woman! May God continue to motivate us all to follow Lady Wisdom!