

The Proverbs 31 Woman

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What do you think of when someone refers to the "wife of noble character" described in Proverbs 31:10-31? Do you think she is a paragon of virtue that you can't possibly measure up to? Do you think Proverbs 31 is a list of requirements for a successful wife, and that you are a failure if you aren't managing to do all of them?

There are many things we can learn from this chapter of Proverbs. Today I want to look at it a little differently, by grouping the verses according to what they deal with.

Introduction: v10 *"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. "*

This wife is rare and valuable. The Hebrew word *chayil*, translated here "noble", is used only four times in the Bible in speaking of women. It suggests more than just being virtuous, but being forceful, capable, having initiative, and the capability to carry through on what she decides.

Husband/Wife: v11&12 *"Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life."* and v28&29 *"Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."*

These verses tell us something of the relationship between this man and his wife - he trusts her judgment, and his faith is rewarded; she doesn't let him down. He blesses and praises her - in other words, he recognizes her worth. Notice two things about these verses: "She brings him good...all the days of her life" - this implies something that happens over a long period of time; and "Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also" - what children bless their mothers? Usually those who are grown and can look back and appreciate what their mother has done for them! Young children are either unaware, or self-centered in their immature thinking - they do not fully understand or appreciate why their mother makes them obey the rules, doesn't let them have their own way all the time, or the hard work and sacrifices on her part. Again, the implication is of an older woman, not a young, newly married one!

v23 *"Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat*

among the elders of the land." There is an implication that the wife is partly to credit for her husband being respected; her virtue would reflect well on him. "He takes his seat among the elders" again implies a mature couple - it is "his seat", implying that he is an "elder".

Who and what she is: The passage tells us that she works vigorously, and that her "arms are strong for her tasks" (v17), that she is well clothed in "fine linen and purple" (v22), that she is "clothed with strength and dignity, and can laugh at the days to come" (v25), and she is not idle (v27). All in all this speaks of a woman who is not lazy, but works hard, who takes care of herself (well dressed, strong), does not need to worry about the future (because her household is well provisioned and in order), and is strong and dignified. Does this sound to you like a woman who is frazzled or run off her feet? Or someone who gets by on little or no sleep? Not to me! I think she is calm and goes about her work in an orderly fashion, but is not trying to do so much that she can't keep it all under control.

What she does: The verses in Proverbs 31 that describe what this lady does are describing the kinds of things that wives can or should do; the things that are within their sphere of authority and concern, the types of things to which they can well apply themselves. Let's see what those are: Clothing vs13,19,21&22 all talk about her working to provide clothing for her household. She does not need to fear the cold, because both the people and the beds are well covered. There are descriptions of her working with wool and flax, and weaving. Does this mean that we should make all our families clothes from scratch too, in order to be a Proverbs 31 woman? Let's think for a moment. In the days of this lady, clothing was mostly simple garments - loincloths, tunics, cloaks. They were usually made out of one or two pieces of woven cloth. To prepare the fibres and then spin them is an incredibly time consuming task. A spinner friend once told me it takes an average of 150 hours just to SPIN the wool for one homespun jersey!! Imagine the time to spin the much finer thread for weaving cloth!! I researched the production of linen cloth by old methods on the web - a professional weaver (who had spent his lifetime learning the art), working full-time with an old-fashioned hand operated loom, could weave enough cloth for one blouse per month. In those days, they did not wash or change their clothing as often as we do, nor did they own the number of garments that we need for basic living. It would be completely impractical for us to card, spin and weave all

our own cloth, then sew it into garments. Ok, so what about sewing - shouldn't the modern Proverbs 31 woman sew her family's clothes? You know, it really comes down to the "watching over the affairs of your household" described in v 27. We need to weigh up what is best for our families. I am an accomplished seamstress and knitter - but I rarely make my families clothes any more, though I used to make nearly all of them. The thing is, it actually costs more these days for the raw materials than it does to buy finished garments. I can better spend my time on other things. There are times when I find bargain materials, and do sew or knit, but I have to always keep it all in perspective. If sewing and knitting were not things I knew how to do, then that would not make me any less of a noble wife - the main point of these verses is that she ensures her family are adequately clothed, not how she does it.

Food In vs 14&15 we see that she brings food from afar, and that she gets up while it is dark and provides food for her family and her servants. The "bringing food from afar" is not about the need to travel to distant shores to gather food - it is about being a good bargain hunter, and finding the best value and quality foods from the various available sources. When you buy groceries with coupons, get better vegetables from a fruit stall, and visit the health food shop for some items that are better priced there, you are doing what the Proverbs 31 woman would do. She also thinks ahead, getting up in time to make sure food is prepared for all her household. In your case, you might put oatmeal in the crockpot to simmer overnight, so it is ready for your family in the morning. Getting up early is a good thing, but thanks to our modern appliances, most of us don't have to rise before dawn to build a fire in order to prepare food! The main thing is to just think ahead and make sure our families are well fed. Note that she had servants to help her with the daily work!

Money In vs 16, she considers and buys a field, then uses her own money to plant a vineyard. Remember how her husband trusts her? She has the authority to buy land to add to the family assets, and the money to plant it. Again, I think this is the doings of a mature woman of experience. And why would she need money to plant the vineyard? Perhaps to purchase the plants. Perhaps to hire the workers to do the planting. Or more likely, both. She is not necessarily planting it all herself!

Vs18 says that "she sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night". Trading here is not about making money - "trade" means to barter goods or services, a typical means of purchasing. Looking for

bargains and making sure she gets the best deals possible for her family are part of it. Often I've heard the "lamp does not go out at night" mentioned separately as evidence that this lady stays up late working. But notice that it is in fact part of the statement about her trading. If you look through the entire passage, you will see that nearly all the verses are two-part, and each part relates to the other. So too, I believe, do these two parts relate directly - trading and lamp at night. The implication is that she reviews her trading and profits last thing at night, after the day's work is done. Turning a profit is perhaps her last priority. Or perhaps she is simply looking back over the day, seeing the state of her household, and making plans for tomorrow.

Vs24 "She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes". She is making some money. Wives can make lots of money if they wish. But notice that she is doing this from home, and it would appear that she is selling the surplus items that she is able to produce AFTER making sure her family are clothed.

Helping the poor and needy vs 20 tells us that she helps the poor and needy. How do you suppose she does that? "Opens her arms to the poor" implies that she is willing to help those who come to her, "extends her hand to the needy" implies she reaches out to those in need. I think this is very much home-based generosity and help. Perhaps she gives a bed for the night to a traveler, or sends extra bedding to a poor family she has heard of. She might provide meals to a sick person. This is not a full-time ministry, or a volunteer position at the local shelter or hospital taking her away from her family. It is a generous woman at home providing help she can afford to those in need around her.

Instructs wisely vs 26 "*She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.*" This lady is wise and experienced; she can instruct others. Just one more implication of an older woman. She would be well qualified according to Titus 2 to "teach the younger women to love their husbands and children."

Watches over the affairs of her household v27 sums up all that she does: "*She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.*" The Proverbs 31 woman watches over household, and makes sure the needs of her family for food and clothing are met. She is careful with money, and able to help the needy. She has wisdom to pass on.

Summary vs 30-31 sum up the value of a Proverbs 31 woman. "*Charm is*

deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate."

The noble wife described in Proverbs 31 is a woman of mature years. She has lots of experience, and at the point she is being described, her children are grown. The types of accomplishments described (buying a field, making and selling garments to the merchants, reaching out to help those in need etc) are things accomplished over a lifetime. They are not the work of a single day or week!

If you have felt in the past that you fall far short of this description, please stop beating yourself up! Remember that you are a work in progress, just as this lady once was. :-) We are ALL works under construction! If you are going to take anything from this passage as "things you should do", they should be:

- 1) Do good to your husband
- 2) Take care of your own basic needs
- 3) Watch over your household (keep an eye on how things are going; don't bury your head in the sand)
- 4) Provide food and clothing for your family
- 5) Try to make the best use of your available funds
- 6) Think ahead to tomorrow

Those 6 things are more than enough to focus on, and they really are the sum of the daily achievements of the Proverbs 31 woman! Don't make it more complicated than it really is! And, these are the very things we are working on through Goodbye Chaos, Hello Peace! :-)

Oh, one more thing I learned as I was studying this passage: Proverbs 31:10-31 are an Acrostic in the original language, meaning each verse begins with one consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This method is used in a few places in the Old Testament, and most likely is a device indicating "here's the A-Z of this subject". In other words, the verses of this passage are meant to describe all the various aspects of the life of a noble wife, not to give a "to-do" list for each day! :-)

Love
Cynthia