

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

by Steve Zeisler

I have had the good fortune to be surrounded by wonderful women all of my life. I recently heard my father bragging about what a terrific rearer of children my mother has been. He described how she got right back in stride with my sister's new baby, and recalled how lovingly she raised her own four children. I have three sisters (no brothers), one wife and one daughter. I'm very appreciative and indebted to the good and capable women who have influenced me. It's probably only for that reason that I am going to undertake to preach on Proverbs 31.

The best known part of this chapter is about womanhood, as a hypothetical "excellent wife" is described. This passage is most often taught to women at retreats, in Bible studies, and so forth. But it has valuable lessons for men as well—most of life is experienced in the same way by men and women. Additionally, we should note that these observations are the thoughtful record of a man who learned important truths about women from a woman (his mother). We all can benefit from the reflections of a king and his maternal mentor. Look at the first verse of Proverbs 31:

The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him.

King Lemuel is not anybody we know elsewhere in Bible history. He is not one of the kings of Israel or Judah. He probably lived long before the monarchy was established in Israel. If you remember the story of Abraham, he fought against four kings from the east of the Jordan (Gen. 14). These were the heads of small city-states or tribes; they weren't kings of empires, but of small regions. Lemuel may have lived as far back as the time of Abraham. Although he wasn't part of the history of the covenant people of God, he was clearly a man who knew God. Job is another figure in the Bible who knew and served God in his generation without being included in any genealogy of salvation history.

So Lemuel was a king, and his mother was a wise woman. She had important insights to share about being a king. And then she asked the question in verse 10, which we'll come to in due course, "An excellent wife, who can find?" Now some scholars say that the section beginning with verse 10 is a separate literary work, not part of Lemuel's reflections. But I'm convinced it belongs here and should be read as part of the insight the king received from his mother.

The role of women in the world has undergone many changes in the last thirty years. There are no conventions anymore, no established doctrines that everybody agrees or adheres to. There are changes daily in the contemporary analysis of these things. And yet we go back to an ancient document, a very learned woman's teaching to her son about women. I hope that we will find truths that are compelling and helpful in today's uncertain world.

Royal Responsibilities

But the first lesson is not about women. It's about being a king. Let's read the oracle that the mother of Lemuel taught him. Proverbs 31:2-9:

What, O my son?
And what, O son of my womb?
And what, O son of my vows?
Do not give your strength to women [that is, don't have sexual relationships with a plurality of women],

Or your ways to that which destroys kings.
It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
It is not for kings to drink wine,
Or for rulers to desire strong drink,
Lest they drink and forget what is decreed,
And pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

Give strong drink to him who is perishing,
And wine to him whose life is bitter.
Let him drink and forget his poverty,
And remember his trouble no more.
Open your mouth for the dumb,
For the rights of all the unfortunate.
Open your mouth, judge righteously,
And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.

The first lesson is, "Don't waste your life pursuing sexual adventures or clouding your mind with alcohol [and we can by extension add the various drugs of our culture]." You can't lead and bless other people if you dissipate yourself on what isn't valuable and lasting.

The redemptive grace of God makes people free, clothed with dignity and strength, hopeful about tomorrow, excited about life, and filled with joy

Kings have responsibilities, as Lemuel's mother reminds him in verse 5. They are to recall what is decreed; that is, they are to remember the laws that ultimately come from heaven, from the mind and heart of God, and to teach and meditate on them. And they are to be concerned about the needy. Political leadership exists not for the sake of the powerful, who can defend themselves and make their way in life. Political authority exists, when it's appropriate, for those who are unfortunate, who are can't adequately speak for themselves or defend themselves. Now there may be men in Lemuel's life who taught him how to fight wars and deal with political intrigues. But his mother taught him passion and self-control.

An Excellent Wife

The second section of Proverbs 31 is the one we've anticipated-the description of a noble or excellent wife. This material is not organized thematically, and we're going to have to jump around a bit to consider it. Verses 10 through 31 form an acrostic in Hebrew. The first letter of each of the 22 verses of this section, when read in sequence, spell out the Hebrew alphabet. It's probably written that way to help in memorization, among other things. Verses 10-31:

An excellent wife, who can find?
For her worth is far above jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
And he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good and not evil
All the days of her life.
She looks for wool and flax,
And works with her hands in delight.

She is like merchant ships;
She brings her food from afar.
She rises also while it is still night,
And gives food to her household,
And portions to her maidens.

She considers a field and buys it;
From her earnings she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
And makes her arms strong.
She senses that her gain is good;
Her lamp does not go out at night.

She stretches out her hands to the distaff,
And her hands grasp the spindle.
She extends her hand to the poor;
And she stretches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid of the snow for her household,
For all her household are clothed with scarlet.

She makes coverings for herself;
Her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the gates,
When he sits among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them,
And supplies belts to the tradesmen.
Strength and dignity are her clothing,
And she smiles at the future.

She opens her mouth in wisdom,
And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
And does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and bless her;
Her husband also, and he praises her, saying,
"Many daughters have done nobly,
But you excel them all."

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.
Give her the product of her hands,
And let her works praise her in the gates.

How in the world is anybody ever going to live like this? This is a remarkably gifted woman, successful at everything she attempts over a broad range of life. And the question, "Who can find such an excellent wife?" is a realistic one. Women without flaws or weakness don't exist in real life.

An Impressive Example

Jill Briscoe wrote a book called *Queen of Hearts* on this chapter of Proverbs, and in her preface she talked about the overwhelming nature of this woman:

The Proverbs 31 woman has long stood as the Statue of Liberty---at the harbor of the City of Womanhood, welcoming all who flee from being anything less than perfect. But what if I have runs in my stocking (I'm sure they were all right when I left home); consistently lose one of my husband's socks in the washing machine; and regularly misplace my car in the supermarket parking lot (It's blue sir---I know it's blue!)? Is there any hope for me if I dream of writing a book about my small children called *From Here to Insanity?* and if I am shaped like a pillow instead of a post?

Is there any hope for a woman if she's not everything she ought to be, facing this description

of an excellent wife. What response do we have-women or men-when encountering a life that is noble and lived to the full? Do we find ourselves filled with hope or sinking in hopelessness?

I'd like to suggest three categories for our consideration of these lessons. First, what do we learn about this woman in her relationships with people? The second is relationships with things; that is, creativity, accomplishments, the efforts she puts forth. And the third is a relationship with God.

Many of the tensions about roles for women in the modern world can be traced to the industrial revolution. In ancient times, certainly when this was written, there wasn't much division between home and work. People worked on farms, with the field and the vineyard close to home. The production of food and clothing, the training of children, the making of musical instruments and art objects, everything required to live life, took place in the context of a family business. The husband and the wife were both part of it, and so were the children. There was continuity between being at home and being at work. In the modern world, where work has been taken a great distance away from home, women have greater struggles with how to balance their lives. Yet human nature doesn't change. All of us were made for relationships: for family, for friendships, for people to know and influence and to be influenced by. We all have minds and skills, and we want to make a mark on life, to use the creative powers God has given us, men and women both. And all of us were made to know God.

Relationships With Others

Let's take human relationships first. What do we learn from what people say about the noble wife in these verses? Verse 28 makes the clear statement, "Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: 'Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.'" Her children appreciate her and honor her. We frequently encounter horror stories about terrible mothers who destroy the lives of their children, but this woman's children remember nothing but her goodness, that she poured her life into them. As adults they look back with praise, thanking their mother and blessing her name.

Her husband, we're told, speaks of her as being the greatest among women. "Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all." Look back at verses 11-12, where we're told a little bit more about her husband. "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life." There is obviously intimacy in the relationship between this woman and her husband. You can't deeply benefit somebody who won't allow you close enough, who won't be vulnerable enough to expose his needs. She does good to him all the days of her life because they have grown close and aware, knowledgeable, and concerned for each other. And it says that her husband in that kind of vulnerability trusts her absolutely. He trusts her with his feelings, with his fears. He trusts her when he's gone. This husband, who has received good from the trust he's placed in his wife, is able to say, after the years of their marriage, "She is the best woman of all."

It's very clear that in her closest relationships, those within her family, there is deep approval and mutual love. These relationships are outstanding and ones that we can be attracted to immediately. But praise also comes from those outside her family. In verse 31, it says, "Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates." She receives public praise; everybody appreciates her. This morning we read the story of the marriage of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 4). All the women of the town of Bethlehem offer public praise for the woman Ruth. And this Proverbs 31 woman is praised in public as well.

Another word about her relationship with others considers the women who work for her. Verse 15 mentions maidens who work in the family business that's being run here. She's overseeing family business that includes a vineyard, making clothing for sale, organizing food, and buying and selling of various sorts. But she gets up early in the morning even before the dawn and prepares food. She's thoughtful enough to make sure that the people who work for her have enough to eat and that all is well with them. And we can assume that they, too, respect and appreciate her.

And we might well imagine that the poor and needy to whom she extends her hand in verse 20 are grateful as

well. She's not the kind of woman who is concerned just about the circle of people around her and is willing to let everyone else fend for themselves. She's committed to those who are poor.

We encounter this woman in the roles of wife, mother, daughter, neighbor and overseer. If you ask, "How does she get along with people?", the answer is very well indeed. She enjoys wonderful success in her relationships with other human beings.

Creative Accomplishment

What about her gifts, her ability to use her hands and head, her skills and mind? What do we learn from her about taking the God-given creativity that is in every human being and using it to the full? Her hands and arms are noted more than once. It says that she strengthens her arms. Now, that probably doesn't mean weight lifting, but rather that they're made more skillful. They accomplish much. She makes clothes that not only keep her family warm in the winter, but are beautiful and appreciated by others.

But it's not just her hands, her mechanical skills, that are in view, but her mind as well. She's a decisive person; she knows what she's doing. She plans ahead. There are a number of references in this chapter to thinking about the future. When winter comes, she doesn't worry or panic, because she's already made provision. She gets up early in the morning to make the food for the people who work in her household. She thinks ahead of time about what needs to be done. And these abilities to organize and anticipate, to see consequences and arrange for them ahead of time, as anyone who works in business knows, are managerial skills that are very important. They require a fine intellect.

In verse 16 it says that she buys a field and plants a vineyard that's going to be part of the family business, but she considers it ahead of time. She doesn't go out and buy any old field. She looks around--this field over here isn't any good (we can imagine her looking at the vines and tasting the grapes), and the second one she looks at won't do either. But eventually, she comes to the right one, and having done the thinking and dealing with the owner, she's able to buy a field.

Fear of the Lord

Lastly, verse 30 talks about her relationship with God. Her relationships with people are excellent. Her use of her gifts is outstanding. And then the question about worship might well be asked. Is she someone who knows God well, who is deeply influenced by him? And the answer is yes, as we might expect. Verse 30: "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised."

Charm and beauty are transitory and lack substance. What matters ultimately is your relationship with God. What makes a woman excellent, what makes a person successful in life, is this deep fear of God that we've talked about, that shows up all through Proverbs. When the thought of displeasing the Lord is abhorrent to you, you have learned to fear him. And this woman, as described here, has been able to take her eyes off her own appearance and focus instead on the thoughts of God for her, and therefore, she should be praised.

When the thought of displeasing the Lord is abhorrent to you, then you have learned to fear him

She's an amazing lady, isn't she? She has great relationships, a wonderful family, and a wonderful reputation with workers, the poor, the townspeople---indeed all who know her. She's gifted at what she does, and her enterprise hums along smoothly. Her children bless her because she attends to them and brings them up lovingly. And then on top of it all, she is a woman of deep spirituality and fear of the Lord. You sort of feel, as Jill Briscoe said, that it's a bit overwhelming.

But what I was primarily drawn to in this description of the Proverbs 31 woman was not her accomplishments. What I was most drawn to was her joy, the freedom with which she lived her life. There is great pressure today for women, as well as for men and children, but women in particular, to live up to some standard that they didn't have an opportunity to create or agree to. And even when they succeed in doing everything they're supposed to do, there's a horrible sense of loss. It's done with dreariness. It's being forced

from them. Life is being used up in a desperate race to achieve the impossible.

It is exactly the opposite with this woman. Every day she bounds out of bed early, before the sun is even up. She can't wait to get at it! She's doing things for people. She likes being creative, being a wife and mother, and making economic decisions. It isn't just getting things done, but doing them well that matters to her. And she looks forward to opportunities to bring blessing. There's a fearlessness about her. Nothing's being taken from her; she's giving herself away.

Now, we may not be anywhere near as talented as this woman is, but the question still remains: Where does the joy come from? Where do we get this kind of freedom? Don't most of us live instead with tragedies, hurts, and self-recrimination?

Strength and Dignity

Look at verses 25 and 26. I'd like to focus here as we close. "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future. She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." Now, she's clothed herself and everybody else in her family with garments that are both useful and beautiful. But Lemuel sees not just the external, but the clothing of the inner person as well—she's covered with strength and dignity. She is a strong person. She is unafraid. She looks forward to the future, not with dread but with optimism. And she is woman who is both wise and kind: isn't that a great combination? Her mouth speaks wisdom, but it's not hard, rough-edged wisdom. There is a deep kindness about it, so that she is able to be sensitive, and bring blessing with her wisdom.

The question of verse 10 keeps coming back: Where do you find people like this? I think the question of where you find them leads us to a different question: How do they come into being? And the answer is that they are the work of God. It is the redemptive grace of God that makes people free, clothed with dignity and strength, hopeful about tomorrow, excited about life, and filled with joy. The message of the gospel announces the reversal of human sorrow, failure, and darkness; all are transformed by resurrection life. God uses other people and directly influences us by his Spirit to make us who we ought to be. I'm not suggesting that any of this is easy or that it comes quickly. It is the wonderful redeeming, sanctifying work of God, making people what they once were not. Everybody starts out with a tragedy, but he takes the tragedy and makes something glorious of it.

Dorothy Sayers wrote a famous essay in the forties. It's called *Are Women Human?* She said early in the essay:

Indeed, it is my experience that both men and women are fundamentally human, and that there is little mystery about either sex, except the exasperating mysteriousness of human beings in general.

The issue here is not so much the significant differences between men and women, but more how to have a life that is joyful, valuable, and filled with relationships, creativity and worship. What's mysterious is being human. And then she goes on to discuss why women ought to be drawn to Christ, and why they have always been.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were the first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man. There has never been such another: a prophet and a teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized, who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them as either "the women, God help us," or "the ladies, God bless them," who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension, who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female, who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend, who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole gospel that bars its pungency from female perversity. Nobody could guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything funny about a woman's nature.

They were first at the cradle and last at the cross, drawn to someone who, because of his love for them, conferred strength and dignity upon them and made them people of wisdom and kindness. These qualities come from Christ. It is ultimately the long, wonderful, saving work of Jesus to make us free to be joyful, creative, and excited about life.

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