

Laughing at the Future

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Date: 26 November 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. Great to see you all. I can't help but wonder what you were thinking as you heard Proverbs 31 being read.

It's a very interesting way to end this book, isn't it? The woman in verses 10 to 31, that's going to be our focus this morning. I call her Wonder Woman. And let's be honest, she's kind of hard to relate to, right?

I mean, if you're a man, she's hard to relate to. And if you're a single woman or a widow, then it's hard to relate to her.

But even if you're a married woman, it's kind of hard to relate to her, right? She's annoyingly perfect. And she's kind of like Martha Stewart before Martha went to prison.

And, you know, or Kate Middleton with her kids. You know, that lovely princess with her two perfect, beautiful kids. And she's hardly ever showing when she's pregnant.

[1 : 0 5] It's wonderful, isn't it? Well, you know, the woman in Proverbs 31, she has a successful career. Her kids are praising her. Her servants love her. Isn't it great when your servants love you?

It's such a special gift. And, you know, so you just, you read it and you just end up feeling a little bit guilty. Or, well, some of you are kind of like, this is pretty close to what my life looks like.

But you know who you are. We know who you are. So this woman, you know, she's, the question is, well, who the heck is she?

I mean, is this another appearance of the personification of wisdom that we saw way back in chapter 9? Do you remember woman wisdom, lady wisdom in chapter 9? Is this the same woman again?

I don't think so. And here's why. Because I think, first of all, that woman wisdom back in the beginning, she's never pictured as a wife or a mother. And secondly, the word in chapter 31 that's used for a woman is only elsewhere in Proverbs used of a real woman.

[2 : 1 1] There's a difference. It's not a historical woman. I'm not saying she's a historical woman. But I'm saying that she's a real person. I'm saying that it's not a personification of some abstract ideal.

But rather, that it's meant as an illustration. That at the end of the book, it's perfectly right that we would have a complete picture of everything we've seen represented by the wise life.

By a life of godly wisdom expressed in this woman wisdom, this godly wife. And this gal, she is wisdom in practice.

Wisdom in practice. Wisdom in practice. And so she's there as an inspiration for us, not as an example. Another way of saying that is that she is descriptive, not prescriptive. It's not here to tell you what to do.

It's not here to tell you whether or not it's right for women to work inside or outside of the home. There's none of that here. It is descriptive, not prescriptive. It's a little bit like the difference between, like, you know, you say, why would, if they want to be helpful, why is she so perfect?

[3 : 15] It's just annoying. Well, it's a little bit like saying, if you were training and teaching your children to spell English words, would you give them a spelling list where some of the words are spelt wrong?

You know, just so that they don't think they have to be perfect. Well, that's not helpful as a teacher, right? You give them all the correct words and you say, you might not get them all right, but this is the way to spell these words.

This is the perfect picture of how to spell. So, what I'm saying is don't be intimidated. She's not a mannequin in a glossy woman's magazine.

Instead, I want you to know, remember this, that wisdom in Proverbs is earthy and it's concrete and it's practical. And that means that it's not just for Sundays.

We've seen this already, right? It means that wisdom is about how you do the laundry. It's about taking your kids to team practice. It's even about how you make a decision about whether you're going to rent or buy a house.

[4 : 17] And it's about how you're going to live your life once your kids move away from home, when they grow up. All of those practical day-to-day life decisions, Monday to Sunday, they're all part of this reality of living with godly wisdom.

So, friends, chapter 31 is not here to embarrass you or make you feel guilty, but it is here to inspire you and, yes, even challenge you towards a lifelong pursuit of godly wisdom.

And the gospel is always going to challenge us, even as it comforts us. So, let's open up Proverbs 31 together. It's helpful to have it open, page 552, and let's have a closer look.

And I need to begin with three just short introductory comments that will help us to understand what's going on here. The first one I want you to notice is how contemporary this feels.

Because this gal does it all, right? She's a small business owner, and she has her own fashion line, which is great. And then she takes the profits from that business, that capital, and she reinvests it in agribusiness.

[5 : 18] And then she finds time even to be a mother and a housekeeper, and she does a little non-profit work on the side in the community. So, some of you, if, you know, I don't know what you've been reading or how long you've been coming to church, but some of you may be surprised to find a woman described this way in the Bible.

Because there's a cultural narrative that says that Christianity oppresses women. And Christianity is one of the things that actually holds a woman down, and holds her down from actually truly flourishing, and living to her true potential.

And without a doubt, friends, that kind of inequality, that kind of oppression, has happened in the name of Jesus, with Christianity behind it. But it absolutely has no basis in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And we need to look no further than the women that surrounded Jesus in his ministry, to see how he empowered them, and equipped them, and how they loved him, and served him, and how he made use of their gifts, and built them up, how they played a vital role in the early church.

And if this is something that's, you know, that's been a hang-up for you, or it's something that's a concern for you, I'd love to talk to you more about it after. But let's push on.

Because secondly, I want you to see how surprising it is, even in the very fact that there's a woman right at the end of Proverbs, that this passage is so women-focused, when we have to admit that much of Proverbs has been, had quite a male perspective.

[6 : 45] It's talked a lot about fathers and sons. So is the book getting confused? Is it just totally lopsided? No, I want to suggest it's just the opposite. In fact, that in chapter 31, the author has carefully compiled a well-balanced picture of true wisdom.

Well-balanced because it's true that the book spoke a lot to sons, although that was also a reference to children, including daughters. But did you know that all through Proverbs, that all of the seams of the book, the kind of key moments, that that's where a woman appears.

So in chapter 1, verse 8, we get a reference to a mother. In chapter 10, verse 1, when we transfer from those opening nine chapters to the 375 Proverbs of Solomon, again, a mother is referenced.

And here in chapter 31, you can see it on your page, verse 1, the words of King Lemuel, an oracle that his mother taught him. A woman can't teach the king unless she has been taught as a girl.

So, three key seams, three mentions of mothers, because godly wisdom is intended for every person, man, woman, boy, and girl. And lastly, I need to make a comment about the literary structure, the sort of form of this, because there's a lot hidden when we translate it to English.

[8 : 12] And in Hebrew, it's an acrostic poem. That means that each verse begins with the consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's like, in other words, the poet is saying, this is the A to Z of excellence.

I want to give you the complete picture of godly wisdom applied in day-to-day life for men and women. And so, with that in mind, I want to have a close look at the text.

And I want to do this under, following the structure under three headings. So, first of all, the introduction there, it's verse 10 to 12, it's her value. And then verse 13 to 27, it's her activities.

That's the longest section. And lastly, the last four verses, her praise. Her value, her activities, and her praise. That's going to take us through the text. Let's start with her value.

Look at verse 10 with me. The first thing we learn is that she's scarce. An excellent wife, a valiant wife, is another way of saying it. Who can find? She's far more precious than jewels.

[9 : 20] The implied answer, who can find? Well, almost no one. That's how rare she is. And so, therefore, secondly, we see that her husband values her, therefore. Verse 11, the heart of the husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

Now, this phrase, her husband trusts in her, this is actually very significant. Because, in fact, in the whole Old Testament, this is one of only two references where a person is said to trust another person.

Instead, all through Scripture, people are described as trusting who? Trusting the Lord God. And so, it's very significant that here a husband is saying, applying the same thing to his wife.

He's saying, I trust you. Darling, I love you so much, I trust you with my whole heart. So, from her values, secondly, we turn to her activities.

And this is the longest section. First of all, as I already mentioned, she's a small business owner and an investor. Look at verse 13 with me. She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.

[10 : 22] So, she has a clothing business. And in the ancient world, you know, a wool garment could cost as much as six months' wages. So, she's very wealthy. She's been successful and she works hard.

All through Proverbs, we've seen that it's the sluggard who's the fool and that hard work is part of godly wisdom. And then in verse 16, she considers a field and buys it.

With the fruit of her hands, she plants a vineyard. This is great because she takes that profit and she reinvests it into the most valuable type of agriculture, which is vineyards.

She's an entrepreneur with street-savvy smarts. And then secondly, it's her social and family achievements that we see. So, first we see her business achievements and next we move a little closer to home.

And there's a progression here starting in verse 20. It starts out in the community and it moves inwards towards more intimate relationships. So, let's look at verse 20. She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.

[11 : 30] I don't know if you spotted there's a repetition of the word hands over and over again. She's working with her hands. That's what makes her so successful. But isn't it interesting that the same hands that are making her all this profit and all this money, well, she's not inoculated against the importance of reaching out into the community and acting with justice and mercy to those who are marginalized.

Verse 21, she's not afraid of snow for her household for all her household are clothed in scarlet. Another translation for scarlet would be double thickness because I've never known the color of your clothes to make a difference in how warm you are.

So it's actually most likely double thickness. You know, in Vancouver it doesn't snow that much but a good mom or dad they don't send their kid out to school on a snowy day in a windbreaker, right?

They're prepared for those rare snow days where they have a nice down coat for them. It's the same with this woman except in this case she's doing it for her household servants even not just her children. Verse 22, she makes bed coverings for herself.

Her clothing is fine linen and purple. Lest we think that she's so busy serving everyone outside that she's completely forgotten about herself and taking care of herself. Well, she's actually got a nice bed covering and she's making clothes for herself out of purple which is purple dye is the most rare and the most expensive.

[12 : 55] And finally, verse 23, her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. This is the second reference to the husband and I mentioned that there's a sort of a progression from out in the community inwards towards the most intimate relationship with her husband.

Well, actually the progression works on both sides of verse 23. It's what's called a chiasm so it's like a pyramid. Verse 20 and 26 match each other. 21 and 25 go up the pyramid towards the peak.

22 and 24 and 23 stands alone at the pinnacle and it has no match which means as a literary structure there's like an arrow pointing to the most important verse in this section which is verse 23.

Let me tell you why. In ancient times it was at the city gate it was kind of like city hall. The city gate functioned as the place where important decisions were made where financial transactions took place where legal disputes were settled.

You can read the book of Ruth to see this taking place an illustration of this. And so let me tell you what this verse doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that after all this woman's hard work it's just so that her husband can run the city with a little boys club.

[14 : 17] It's not just a patriarchy that we see here. No, because the word that we see translated in verse 23 as known could even be better translated as respected.

So it would read like this her husband is respected in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. You see this wife's work in the community in her business and in her home it has actually been a factor in earning herself and her husband this respect and admiration of the city and its leaders.

And it's her financial contributions to the home that have freed up her husband so that he can afford to serve in public life and I trust that he will be bringing his own godly wisdom to bear in the important decisions of the community.

And we know how rare godly wisdom is in making big decisions for communities and therefore how valuable this role would be. And finally I want you to see that this woman plays a leading role in the welfare of her town but not just that but that when we come to the very end of the chapter we're going to look at this closer later.

We see in verse 31 that all of her achievements lead to her earning the highest possible praise from those who sit at the city gates. So let's have a look at the last section which is her praise.

[15 : 44] So we saw first her value her achievements and now finally her praise beginning at verse 28. First she's praised by her family. Her children rise up and call her blessed.

My kids do this all the time. It's fabulous. This is the highest possible honor because even her sons when she enters the room you know they stand up.

It's kind of like Downton Abbey right where all the men the gentlemen they get up when a lady enters the room. Don't you wish ladies that the guy still did that. It's beautiful right? So it's her children that do this for her and then continuing the verse her husband also and he praises her and there's a little quote of how he praises her in verse 29.

Many women have done excellently or valiantly but you my boo you surpassed them all. The Hebrew for praise here is hallelujah and it's where we get the English word hallelujah.

It's the highest again I can't overstate this wherever we see it it's the highest possible praise hallelujah. So we move from this time out from the intimate praise of her family out into the community in verse 31.

[16 : 57] It says give her of the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the gates. And verse 31 I want you to notice it's the first it's actually the first command in the whole passage.

The command give her. So here the leaders of the community like I said earlier are urged to join in this praise for this woman. You could say it's like a standing ovation at city hall.

And all this leads us to this very key verse in verse 30 that's sandwiched between 31 and 29.

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. So we see here that the source the foundation the key to all of her success everything we've seen from this wonder woman the foundation of it all is the fear of the Lord this central theme in Proverbs that we first saw in chapter 1 verse 7 and now here it is in the very second to last verse of the whole book sprinkled all through the book the fear of the Lord in summary this poem it's an A to Z of a wise life we see that godly wisdom it permeates all parts of our life it's in the church it's for men and it's for women it's for boys and it's for girls and it's all rooted and grounded in the fear of the Lord which is defined in Proverbs as trusting the Lord with all your heart and therefore depending on him in all things and this is our last week in

Proverbs and so I want to close by taking a closer look as we try to apply these verses and not just this chapter but actually looking to apply and integrate the whole book into our lives and I want to begin this by having you look again at verse 31 remember I said verse 31 the only command in the book in the chapter give her praise my question for you is do you praise the wisdom that you see in those you love do you praise your wise husband or your wise wife do you praise your wise friend godly wisdom deserves to be noticed and praised not not as a back padding to puff each other up but actually praise is for the purpose of building one another up it's to inspire and to encourage it's to spur one another on

[19 : 40] Hebrews says and I love the idea of our children and our youth seeing godly wisdom seeing godly wisdom on display and then seeing those folks receiving praise and honor from our community wouldn't that be great that's what mentorship looks like and secondly I want you to look at verse 30 again with me remember the first half of the verse read like this charm is deceitful and beauty is vain I want you to see that this is the only negative in the whole poem that's very significant as well the only negative so let me ask you another question what priorities do you think our culture places on women what priorities does our culture place on women let me offer three suggestions with fear and trembling first that there's a priority for equality and we see that as a narrative of equal money equal sex and really at the root of it all is equal power and secondly there's a narrative that says that choice or freedom is the most important thing for a woman that a woman needs to have complete freedom with her body with her career and finally there's a narrative of the importance the value of beauty and of charm and you know despite all the progress that's been made by feminism it's amazing that this is more pervasive than ever

I think for our young women and we shouldn't think that our young men are escaping it either especially with the rise of social media I mean beauty and charm and the value that we place on them but I want you to have a look with me at verse 25 verse 25 says this remember this is describing this woman strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come you know this verse is telling us that our human flourishing our value and our worth is found in the fear of the Lord not in charms or beauty because charm is easy to fake and beauty is fleeting beauty passes away and verse 25 says instead of those things that are outward and superficial a godly person is clothed with strength and dignity and therefore she laughs at the future because she rests in the security of knowing that the

Lord is her refuge and her shield that's the hope that the gospel gives us friends the hope not only in this life but in the life to come that our identity is found in Christ alone not on anything outside of ourselves not on finding more power or more freedom or in our appearance self and finally I have another question for you as we wrap up Proverbs you know one of the things that's going to stay with me is Proverbs challenge of our amazing capacity for self deception that if I'm really brutally honest with myself I can't really trust my own heart and so but in the face of that self defeating no Proverbs says if you humble yourself before the Lord and trust him there is a path for a good life so my question for you is what area of your life do you need

God's help in seeking godly wisdom we've covered a lot of topics in this sermon series but what area of your life has the Lord convicted you of that you need his help in seeking godly wisdom because it would be a tragedy if you read Proverbs and then you you know there's a verse in here that's literally translated you gird up your loins right you pull up your bootstraps and you set out striving to do better to live wiser because none of us can do that and actually that's the whole point of this woman right the valiant woman in Proverbs 31 she can't do it either that's why the whole point is that she's not self sufficient the whole point is verse 30 that she relies solely on the fear of the Lord to provide every need and fulfill every desire and so our value is not in what other people think of us but rather in our status as a beloved child of God and our achievements are not a means for more power or a means for more status or to find our ultimate freedom and fulfillment but rather our achievements are actually an act of worship and an expression of our dependence on the

Lord and finally our praises those praises that usually you know it's all about the standing ovation in our culture is usually all about me but our praises are actually directed at those who fear the Lord not for their glory but for the glory of God alone and above all our praises are directed at the Lord Jesus Christ alone because friends it's him not this woman in Proverbs 31 who actually fully and completely embodies the wise and obedient life it was him alone who completely feared and trusted this way of the Lord the good path and he did it even to the point of death he did this so that we could be free free to share in the abundant life that he offers us it begins now and it will go on forever and ever and let me pray for us as we close would you join with me in praying almighty

[25 : 57] God we ask you by your power to drive away all of our self righteousness and our striving we stand at the foot of the cross now and we cast down all those burdens at your feet we pray now father that your word would continue to convict and to comfort us that it would be the fear of God and our love for the Lord Jesus which guides our steps and Holy Spirit we ask that you would equip us to act wisely you would do this for your glory and for the praise of your name in Christ's name we pray amen