

to live *Valiantly*

A study on the Proverbs 31 Woman by Melissa McDonald

## *Table of Contents*

<i>Aspiring to be a Hero</i>	3
<i>Heroic Deeds</i>	8
<i>Victorious Endeavors</i>	13
<i>Her Noble Purpose</i>	17
<i>A Trustworthy Ally</i>	22
<i>Notes</i>	28

## *Aspiring to be a Hero*

Look into the sky. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so much higher are God's thoughts than our thoughts.<sup>1</sup> Through all of Scripture He communicates His thoughts, His ways, and most importantly Himself to us. In the conclusion to the book of Proverbs, He lays out for us what a true woman, looks like.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes she may surprise us and sometimes she may overwhelm us, but before we begin examining what she is like, take a minute to ask yourself, *"When I step back from the business of life, what kind of woman do I aspire to be?"* Write down a few thoughts about this vision:

### For Discussion

What messages do you hear from *culture* about what an ideal woman looks like? Ask women of different ages to share what the cultural ideal was for their generation.

What is the picture of an ideal woman you've observed in *Christian community*?

Take a magazine you've read in the last month and look at a few articles asking,  
*"What message does this tell me about what is ideal?"*

There are so many messages we hear about what is ideal. Sometimes in a single issue of a magazine we can get conflicting advice. Only the Bible gives us a picture that's consistent and ultimately fulfilling. The woman described in Proverbs 31:10-31 is the biblical portrayal of an ideal wife. As we study this woman, it will most likely confirm certain ideas we have about what we ought to be and at other times challenge our ideas.

*"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." ~Psalm 119:18*

In the opening line to the poem in Proverbs 31:10-31 the woman is called valiant. Looking at a few translations helps flush out the full implications of the word. Here are a few ways translators summarize this ideal wife:

NIV: “noble character”  
 NASB: “excellent”  
 NRSV: “capable”  
 ESV: “excellent”  
 NET: “noble”  
 Amplified: “capable, intelligent, and virtuous”

#### Bible Study Tip

To do this type of comparison on your own, you can lookup a variety of translations online through a website such as BibleGateway.com.

**Pick a few of the words listed above and write down what they communicate about this woman?**

This word “is frequently found in *military* contexts,” and could literally be translated a *woman of valor*.<sup>3</sup> Just as a man would need courage and strength to be a hero in war, so also this woman displays the virtues that designate her as a heroic woman. “Here the title indicates that the woman possesses all the *virtues, honor*, and

*strength* to do the things that the poem will set forth.”<sup>4</sup>

“If our religion is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent; for it will be precisely the puzzling or the repellent which conceals what we do not yet know and need to know.”

~C.S. Lewis<sup>6</sup>

This designation of a *valiant* wife isn’t the only place the poem utilizes images of the aggressive strength belonging to a hero. In fact, words with *heroic* connotations are found throughout the poem.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter we will look at the portrayal of her *strength* and in the following chapters we will unpack why she needs to be so *valiant*.

Below are some verses where the poet chooses words that are typically used in military or other aggressive settings as he describes the woman. These heroic connotations don't change the meaning of what the woman does, but illustrate the weightiness and gravity of her role. **Read through the entire poem in Proverbs 31:10-31. Then look over the words below that are typically used in a heroic context and choose three of the images that you find particularly surprising or intriguing. Answer the questions about those verses.**

- Verse 11 the good that her husband does not lack is also the military word used for *plunder*, the goods the winning party took from the people they had defeated.

**Bringing home plunder implied victory. Think through the effort, energy, and strategy it would have taken to defeat an enemy so completely that the army carried home plunder. How does this enhance your understanding of the effort, energy, and strategy the ideal wife puts forth to ensure that her husband lacks nothing of value?**

- Verse 15 her act of preparing food for her family draws on the imagery of a lioness *hunting prey* at night.

**Write down adjectives that come to mind when you think of a lioness hunting for her cubs:**

**What is revealed about the woman by comparing her provision of food for her family to that of a lioness?**

“The preying metaphor must not be pressed to signify unethical activity; this woman fears the LORD.”

~Bruce Waltke<sup>8</sup>

- Verse 17 the woman is described as *girding her loins with strength*. “When men needed freedom for work or for running, they lifted the hem of the tunic [the man’s basic piece of clothing] and tucked it into the girdle [a belt that held the tunic to the waist] to gain greater freedom of movement. It was called ‘girding up the loins,’ and the phrase became a metaphor for preparedness.”<sup>7</sup>

“The metaphor [of girding her loins] points to her psychic and spiritual motivation and preparation that equips her powerful body. Thus girded mentally and spiritually, ... signifying that she both resolves to make her arms strong and that she has the strength and endurance to complete the task to which she commits herself after prudent evaluation.”

~Bruce Waltke<sup>9</sup>

**What does the use of this image show you about how she views her tasks and the ways she prepares herself for them?**

- Verse 25 shows the woman *laughing in victory* over her enemy, the uncertain future.

**In what ways can the future be like an enemy?**

**Would a warrior laugh over an enemy if he felt like he would likely lose to the enemy?**

**How do you respond when the future poses threats? How does the ideal woman respond?**

- Verse 27 the ideal wife watches over her household, which is the normal Hebrew term *to spy*.

**How would you describe the intensity and intentionality with which a spy watched everything around him?**

- Verse 31 exhorts the observer to extol or sing a *victory song* for this heroic woman.

**Describe the mood surrounding the singing of a victory song when a hero returned from victory in battle:**

Joshua was about to begin the military feat of taking the promise land in Joshua 1:9 when he was charged, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

**What is the underlying reason why Joshua and the heroic woman are strong and courageous (see also Proverbs 31:30)?**

**Name one responsibility that you are shrinking back from and not strengthening yourself for:**

**What can you do to strengthen yourself for this task? Do you need to strengthen yourself spiritually, physically, intellectually, or by becoming more competent in a certain skill?**

**What is one step you can take this week to strengthen yourself for this task?**

At times I feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the strength and the mastery over her work that this woman possessed. I know my weakness too well to imagine I can mimic her heroic strength on my own. I find encouragement from the story of Nehemiah. He also had an overwhelming task from the Lord: to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. And Nehemiah had much opposition to his work, so in Nehemiah 6:9 he recalls the following event:

*They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."*

*But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."*

## Heroic Deeds

The emphasis on her *work manufacturing clothes* is a bit unexpected in this poem about an ideal wife. In fact, half of the poem addresses her tasks of *spinning* and *weaving* and emphasizes how *profitable* she is! Why isn't more said about her prayers, her steadfast faith in the LORD, or her meditation on God's Word?

It is important to realize that what's left unsaid isn't necessarily absent in this woman. The structure of the poem is an acrostic, where each verse begins with the

next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This structure's primary function is to show a *completeness*; it's like saying this woman is

"everything from A to Z."<sup>1</sup> So even though the poem doesn't mention her praying it doesn't intend to imply that an ideal wife never prays. In fact, this poem will lead us to conclude that this woman has a very close relationship with God. However, even with that said, we must wrestle with the question of why her work manufacturing clothes is mentioned more than anything else in this poem.

**Have you ever struggled to incorporate the things you learned about God into your *everyday* life after you've had an extend time to**

**focus on spiritual things? Write a few thoughts about why it may be difficult to return to your routine:**

"One thing however is most remarkable. The standard of godliness here exhibited is not that of a religious recluse, shut up from active obligations, under the pretense of greater sanctity and consecration to God. Here are none of those habits of monastic asceticism, that are now extolled as the highest point of Christian perfection. One half at least of the picture of the *virtuous woman* is occupied with her her personal and domestic industry."

~Charles Bridges<sup>2</sup>



The entire book of Proverbs is about what life looks like when wisdom is either applied or despised. It concludes with a description of the way this woman's approach to *work* is an expression of the kind of life fearing the LORD results in; it is wisdom applied to her *ordinary tasks* of life.

A hero never merely thinks heroic thoughts or restricts himself to developing inward virtues. A hero *acts heroically* in real life. And so we see this poem celebrating the ideal woman's valor as her *heroic deeds* are sung.<sup>3</sup>

"By definition, the fear of the LORD means in part living according to the wisdom revealed in [Proverbs]. This woman's itemized, self-sacrificing activities for others exemplify the fear of the LORD."

~Bruce Waltke<sup>5</sup>

The description of her *industry* begins in Proverbs 31:13 where she selects the materials for her work (flax is the plant used to make linen) and goes through verse 19. At that point the poem shifts to itemizing her contributions to her home and community.<sup>4</sup> Looking at her *work in life* reveals things about her *character* and *spiritual vibrancy* that simply examining spiritual topics would not reveal.

Think about how God's Spirit produces patience in our lives. What role does studying the Bible play in how we grow more Christlike in this way? Consider if this virtue could be produced in your study and prayer time alone or what role "living life" plays in the formation of patience:

In this poem esteeming the ideal wife, we see several examples where *life* reveals her *spiritual vibrancy* and *character*. In verse 21 the poet writes, "When it snows she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet."

### Making Clothes

Clothing was very expensive in the ancient world. It took about 400 hours of work to make one garment, over 200 of those hours would have just been spinning the yarn.<sup>7</sup> A good woolen garment cost two months wages and an inexpensive linen garment cost one half of a months wage.<sup>8</sup>

The average household income in the US is about \$50,000.<sup>9</sup> So in today's money it would cost about \$8,300 for a wool garment and a little over \$2,000 for an inexpensive linen garment. You can see why most people only had one set of clothing!

Because of the extremely high price most women made the clothing for their families. If she worked forty hours a week and all she did was manufacture clothing, it would take about two and a half months to make each garment. But this wasn't the woman's only work, in fact spinning was often done only when the woman had, for the moment, completed her other responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Verse 16:

As you can see in the sidebar, providing clothing for your family was a huge task. Warm clothes were a source of protection from the cold weather. There could be many reasons to doubt whether or not your work would be enough to ensure your family's well being in winter.

Women generally spun anywhere and anytime their hands were free from other tasks. It is likely that most of the women listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount were busy spinning when he exhorted them, "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these."<sup>6</sup>

Just as Jesus urged his listeners, this woman did not worry as she put in the enormous effort to protect her family from the weather with warm clothing. She shows wisdom applied to life as she works diligently yet her work is done with confidence, not in constant fear of the cold winter.

**How does the way she approaches her work reveal her character in the following verses? (This is not a complete list!)**

Verse 13:

Verse 15:

*"And she arises while it is still night belongs to the preying imagery and should not be taken literally; a lioness hunts food by night, but not an aristocratic woman!"*

~Bruce Waltke<sup>11</sup>

Verse 17:

Verse 27:

The Bible emphasizes in many places the way our relationship with God should be evident in our *everyday actions*. Paul often begins his New Testament letters with theology, a gazing upon our glorious God, and then towards the end of his letter he gives practical ways this knowledge of God should radically change the way we go about life. In his letter to the Corinthian church in 3:22-24 he writes,

*“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”*

What is the danger of only looking at spiritual disciplines (Bible study, prayer, fellowship, etc.) and not how you deal with the everyday tasks of life as you assess your obedience to God and growth as a Christian?

As you look at descriptions above of how the wife of valor approaches her work, reflect on the work you did yesterday. **Mark which of those descriptions could have described your attitude and your ability to do your work and which would not describe how you went about your work.**

#### For Discussion

Are there times when our work honors God even though we wouldn't fit the description of the valiant woman?

Think of one example from your work yesterday where your approach to your work revealed Christlikeness in your life and one example where it did not:

As you consider what your approach to your work reveals about your heart, spend time in prayer asking Him to renew your heart so that your path might lead to life and that your actions might make Him look beautiful to a watching world.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

*Psalms 139:23-24*

## Victorious Endeavors

Women in the ancient near east had many *responsibilities*, you can see an overwhelming list in the side note! The poet could have examined a different task in this poem. What did spinning and weaving uniquely allow the poet to reveal about this heroic wife?

“Spinning was a relatively light, portable, continuous task that fitted well into the interstices of woman’s heavier and seasonal labor (planting, harvesting, herding the goats, milking, processing the milk into yogurt and cheese and dried milk, harvesting and curing olives, making olive oil and wine, keeping doves or pigeons for the eggs, gathering brushwood for cooking, cleaning and grinding grain for flour, carrying products to market, hauling water, and, of course, childcare and cooking).”<sup>3</sup>

The picture here is not of a woman using her down time to indulge in a hobby, but one who is using every moment *industriously*.

She is a woman who has developed the skills to do her work well,<sup>1</sup> and the result of her diligence and skill is her *profit*.

The Bible is full of stories and pictures that communicate more powerfully than statements of fact. Verse 18 begins with the

straightforward statement, “She sees that her trading is profitable,” and then elaborates on her profitability by using the imagery of her lamp not going out at night. “In a well ordered house the lamp burned all night as a sign of life; its extinction marked calamity.’ [...] Her lamp burning all night signifies her enduring prosperity.”<sup>2</sup>

**Slow down and create this picture in your mind. In one home the lamp burns all night and one in complete darkness. In the first there is peace and prosperity. In the second there is great turmoil and fear. Let the pictures sink in. Now read verse 18 again.**

“Compare the impact of the following sentences. First, ‘The Bible says that God loves people.’ Second, ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for he sheep.’ Both statements are true. They even mean the same thing. But they don’t do the same thing. The second statement gets to you, stays with you, works on you. That’s because it comes with pictures and stories attached.”

~David Powlison<sup>4</sup>

In order to trade and earn this profit she needed an *abundance of textiles*. In verse 21 we see that she provides well for her family with her textiles but she does not stop once her family is well clothed; she continues manufacturing textiles and verse 24 describes the *surplus* of garments and sashes that she *sells*. As we saw in the last chapter, this entailed an enormous amount of work. It is likely that she had trained her maidservants to work with her in order to produce the abundance of goods described in this poem.<sup>5</sup>

**If the poem only talked about her clothing her family would you feel more or less comfortable with it?**

Verses 14 and 15 describe the ways she uses her profit. In verse 14 the valiant wife is described as being like *merchant ships* that bring food from afar. “[T]hough purchased from local merchants, [bring food from afar] connotes an atmosphere of faraway countries; that is, beyond the usual nourishment from fields or trades, she provides tasty foreign delicacies. Her bounteous table replicates in miniature that of ... King Solomon.” Her resources to provide this spread for her family would have come from the economic foundation of her *weaving industry*.<sup>6</sup>

**What does her profitability show about the ways she has developed the skills needed for her tasks?**

Next, verse 15 tells us that she uses her earnings to *buy a field* and then *plant a vineyard*. This was no small financial endeavor! “The land was first terraced so as to use up the stones that littered the soil, at the same time providing a means of soil conservation during the heavy rains. The plot was then surrounded by a wall and a ditch, the excavated soil from the ditch forming the foundation for the wall. A fence of thorns was placed on top of the wall to keep out any damaging wild animals [... or people] who might raid the vineyard to steal the fruit. [...] The soil was prepared by

turning it over with a mattock. Finally, a watchtower was constructed that served as a summer cottage, a place for the family to stay during the summer while the grapes were being picked. It was not a cheap thing to build.”<sup>7</sup>

**List the ways these activities present the heroic woman as a capable wife:**

**Do these activities suggest that she is challenging her husband’s authority?**

Profit making was not done to the negligence of her *other responsibilities*. The woman’s ability to do so much spinning also implies that she had not neglected her other work. It would be ridiculous for her to spin so abundantly without taking care of the tasks that sustained the life of her household. Her watchfulness over all the tasks under her care is described in verse 27: “She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.”

**Unlike the valiant woman, it’s easy to procrastinate one task by busying ourselves with other tasks. What tasks are you tempted to neglect by busying yourself with other, perhaps less important, work?**

Furthermore, spinning didn’t require the woman’s full attention. “It was while [the woman] was busy at this kind of work that she would talk to other women and to the children.”<sup>8</sup> It is likely that while she was making garments she was giving the *faithful instruction* mentioned in verse 26. This work did not take her away from *investing relationally* in her children and household but was an activity her hands were busy with while she strengthened her family by *imparting wisdom*.

**Can you think of any modern employment opportunities that also allow this relational time with family members?**

How do most careers differ from this picture?

Can you think of other tasks, besides economic endeavors, that truly benefit a woman's household and also allow for instructive conversations and the ability to invest in relationships with family members while they are being completed?

How do most non-financial endeavors differ from the ways she uses her time?

By dwelling on her spinning and weaving the poet is able to show that she is very *profitable*, but not at the expense of the other *responsibilities*. She is *victorious* in her profit making and she is *victorious* as she manages the other needs of her household.

#### For Discussion

As we follow Christ, we are not made perfect all at once. How should we respond when we fall short of this picture?

Are there activities you are currently pursuing or avoiding that you need to reevaluate after studying this woman's work of spinning?

*May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us;  
establish the work of our hands for us --  
yes, establish the work of our hands.  
Psalm 90:17*



## Her Noble Purpose

Living *valiantly* requires that you have a *greater purpose* than your own comforts and pleasures. A hero in war is willing to *take risks*, even risk his own life, for a higher cause. All the heroic imagery and all her diligent work is for a purpose *beyond herself*.

“She is so precious because she uses her strength, ability, wisdom, and valor so totally and selflessly for others”

~Bruce Waltke<sup>1</sup>

**Read through the poem in Proverbs 31:10-31 and note each reference to the people this woman is living and working for:**

There are *many people* the idea woman benefits, but in a very poetic way this poem shows *her husband* to be at the center of all this valiant wife does.

- The first way the poet emphasizes her husband is through an *inclusio*, a technique where the husband is referenced both at the *beginning* and the *end* of the poem. **You can observe this in verses 10-12 and 28-29.**

- The second poetic technique used is a *chiasm* in the second half of the poem. This structure is where the first and the last lines are similar, the second and the second to the last lines are similar, etc. In a chiasm the *center* is the point that is most emphasized.

### Bible Study Tip

About 1/3 of the Bible is written in poetry (the Psalms, Proverbs, and many of the prophetic writings for example). Looking for *inclusios* and *chaisms* may help you see more clearly what the poet is emphasizing.

You can see how this works by outlining the second half of the poem below.<sup>2</sup> It might be helpful to do the first blank, then the last blank and following that pattern work your way to the center.

v. 20 \_\_\_\_\_ (body part mentioned)  
 v. 21a \_\_\_\_\_ (fear)  
 v. 21b \_\_\_\_\_ (clothing)  
 v. 22 \_\_\_\_\_ (what she makes)  
 v. 23 \_\_\_\_\_ (husband)  
 v. 24 \_\_\_\_\_ (what she makes)  
 v. 25a \_\_\_\_\_ (clothing)  
 v. 25b \_\_\_\_\_ (fear)  
 vv. 26-27 \_\_\_\_\_ (body part mentioned)

Another way this poem emphasizes the woman's relationship with her husband is found in the *context* of the poem. Verse 31 shows a prospective husband in search of a wife and the first verse of the chapter fills in a few more details

Who wrote this poem (31:1)?<sup>3</sup>

Who taught him this (31:1)?

#### For Discussion

How is this poem important for a *mother* to consider as she raises *sons* or *daughters*?

For women who have already raised their children, how can they use this poem to "*teach what is good*" to the younger women? (Titus 2:3)

The poet also focuses on her husband by mentioning him often.

Contrast the frequency of the direct mention of her *husband* in the poem with direct references to her *children*. What do you notice?

"The passing reference to *her sons* ... in the conclusion suggests that the wife finds fulfillment less in having given birth to sons and raised them than in maximizing her opportunities on behalf of *her husband*."

~Bruce Waltke<sup>4</sup>

The wife's *determination* to *benefit her husband* is why she performs her responsibilities so *valiantly*. This picture of putting aside our desires for others isn't only for women. Paul exhorts the church in Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." He goes on to show how Christ himself is our example to follow in this sacrificial lifestyle.

One unique way this command plays out in the life of married women is our role as a *helper* of our husbands, but *all women* are to follow Christ's model of putting others ahead of our own desires. The story of Ruth is about a woman who also receives the title "*valiant woman*" (Ruth 3:11). The books in the Hebrew Bible are arranged differently than the books in the Christian Old Testament, and in the Hebrew Bible the book of Ruth immediately follows this description of the valiant wife.

In the story of Ruth, a Hebrew family flees to a foreign country during famine in Israel. While there, one of the sons marries a woman named Ruth. Ruth's husband, her father-in-law, and her brother-in-law all die while they are staying in her country. Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi eventually decides to return to Israel because the famine has passed. When Naomi announces her plans to return, Ruth will not be persuaded to stay in her home country but goes to Israel with Naomi.

Because there are no men in the family and no source of income, Ruth finds a field to glean in -- a practice where the poor could follow the harvesters gathering the food the harvesters missed -- and in that way she provides for herself and her mother-in-law. The field she is gleaning in is owned by Naomi's relative, Boaz. He observes Ruth's diligence and tells his harvesters not to harm her and provides food and water for Ruth while she works in his field. Naomi arranges for Ruth to see if Boaz will be her husband. While Ruth is following Naomi's plan Boaz calls her a *valiant woman*.

When she receives this recognition from Boaz, Ruth is an *unmarried* woman.

**How does Ruth demonstrate the qualities that bring her this distinction in her singleness?**

There are probably times for each of us when setting our own agenda aside to help someone feels *rewarding*, but other times when it breeds *bitterness*. By becoming aware of this temptation, it can help us fight against sin when those situations arise.

What circumstances make it particularly difficult for you to *cheerfully* use your “strength, ability, wisdom, and valor so totally and selflessly for others?”

What tasks or hobbies are you tempted to put above your husband’s priorities or that you struggle to leave undone with someone interrupts?

#### For Discussion

What *reasons* does the Bible give for us to leave behind our own pursuits? What *promises* does it make for those who *obey*?

Ask you husband one thing he would really like for you to do for him this week. Or consider how you can show this type of character by caring for someone in distress.

Which things that you’d like to do will you have to set aside to accomplish this?

“[A master list of projects] helps me put the projects in the order of priority: first, what would serve my husband, and second, what would help me serve my family more effectively. Otherwise, I gravitate toward organizing and cleaning those areas of my house that most bother me, but don’t necessarily serve my family.”

~Carolyn Mahaney<sup>5</sup>

Our hearts rebel against this idea of always *laying down our agenda* for others.  
But God is in the process of make the heart of every believer *new*. And with the same  
power that raised Christ from the dead, *he will* complete this work.

*“Turn my heart toward your Statues  
and not toward selfish gain.”  
~Psalm 119:36*

## A Trustworthy Ally

The valiant wife proves herself *trustworthy* to her husband. And her trustworthiness allows him to serve as one of the *elders* who sat at the *city gate*.<sup>1</sup> In patriarchal societies there were elders with respect to the household, the city, the

### The City Gate

The city gate had many purposes in an ancient town, beginning with protection. “The elaborate construction of the gate was useful in peacetime. Rooms were provided in the walls for merchants to stay, and the shade provided by the high walls made it a good place for meetings. The gate was therefore a place for public speaking, the listeners sitting on stone benches, and for conversation. It was useful for resting, and was the place where local juice was dispensed, or should have been. Gates were always shut at night ... The market normally opened off the gate and was associated with it.”<sup>8</sup>

various tribes, and the northern and southern kingdoms.<sup>2</sup> These elders sat in the gate, “the traditional courtroom of ancient villages and towns.”<sup>3</sup> One of their main responsibilities was to see that *justice* was

carried out in the town. The Law spelled out several types of cases that were specifically to be governed by the elders of that town<sup>4</sup> and the story of Ruth gives an example of the elders overseeing justice.<sup>5</sup>

Though this was an *honorable* and *weighty* role and essential for the *just governing* and *righteousness* of a community, it is unlikely that there was much if any financial compensation.<sup>6</sup> This is why it was so

necessary for the woman described in this poem to be *profitable*. “By [the wife’s] economic contributions she frees her husband to play a prominent public role.”<sup>7</sup> Her husband can trust her fully with the things under her care so he does not need to trouble himself with those tasks. Instead, he can spend his energy working for the *righteousness* of their community.

**How is leadership in the local church similar and different from the role of the elder in ancient Israel?**

In today's society additional income does not necessarily lighten man's work load. He is not freed to have more vacation days or have the ability to leave early and accept slightly less pay if his wife works. So freeing our husband's to serve like this man served isn't always as simple as making money.

**In what modern situations does providing extra income practically free our husbands to be leaders promoting justice and righteousness in our communities and in the local church?**

**What things besides finances can women take care of in order to allow men more time and energy to take leadership roles that promote righteousness and justice?**

**Not every man will use freedom from certain responsibilities to further God's kingdom; this is especially true if he is not a follower of Christ. What similarities do you see between the description of the wife of valor in Proverbs 31:10-31 and the way Peter exhorts woman to act when they have unbelieving husbands in 1 Peter 3:1-6?**

This wife's role in *enabling justice* stands in sharp contrast to the women in the first poem King Lemuel's mother taught him in verses 1-9. There the women, like excessive alcohol, lead the king away from his role to protect the oppressed with just governing.<sup>9</sup>

**How can women in today distract men from providing righteous leadership and looking out for those who are easily taken advantage of?**

The woman described in this poem also *personally* gets involved with the plight of the poor as she stretches out her hands to the needy.

“The hands that grasp to produce  
open wide to provide.”

~Van Leeuwen<sup>12</sup>

**Do you find it more challenging to help people personally or to be someone who enables others to help people?**

It is because of all she does in the poem that the poet can say, “Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.”<sup>10</sup> This statement that the heart of her husband trusts her entails that his well-being stands or fall on her reliability.<sup>11</sup>

**Thinking back on what you have learned in this study, list the ways his his well-being is reliant on his wife?**

**Choose one item listed above and explain how her husband would be damaged if she did not carry out that responsibility well:**

Verse 11 states that her husband “has full confidence in her,” or, as the NASB translates the phrase, “the heart of her husband trusts her.” This is a very unusual thing to be esteemed in Scripture. “Outside of this text and Judg. 20:36, Scripture condemns trust in anyone or anything apart from God/the LORD ... The present exception elevates the valiant wife, who herself fears the LORD, to the highest level of



spiritual and physical competence. The claim implies that this husband and wife enjoy a robust spiritual relationship.”<sup>13</sup>

**You may know a woman who is not a follower of Christ, yet looks very similar to this woman as she uses her time well, benefits her husband and family, and is philanthropical as she contributes to a more just society. If you can, think of a specific woman that fits this description. Contrast the way God would view her husband trusting in her with the way God views trusting in the wife described in this poem.**

The book of Proverbs is all about *wisdom applied to life*. People who do not follow Christ can imitate habits that lead to a more productive and relationally peaceful life without having a change in *heart*. But ultimately they are not wise. True *wisdom* begins by having a right response to God that the Bible calls “the fear of the LORD.”<sup>14</sup>

John Piper uses an analogy to *illustrate* the fear of the LORD. His family went to visit some friends who had a very large dog when one of his sons was about eight years old. The dog could be *aggressive* but was also well trained. At one point in the evening his son wanted to get something he had left in the car. The big dog stood between the doorway and the car and the woman at the house said that he would be fine as long as he didn’t run from the dog. So the boy began to walk to the car and the dog followed close behind. The boy became *afraid* of the dog and began to run. At that point the dog began to *pursue* him but the woman commanded and the dog stopped.

Piper explains that the dog could have easily out run his son; there would have been no competition. When his son began to run from the dog it revealed that though he was afraid of the dog, *he wasn’t nearly afraid enough*. If he had understood more

accurately his abilities and the dog's abilities, he would have been too afraid to run from it.<sup>15</sup>

When we have a right understanding of the *beauty*, and *wisdom*, and *signity*, and *might*, and *justice* of God and when we realize that we have been crowning ourselves ruler of our lives instead of submitting to him, we will be too afraid to run away. If we're *afraid* of God try and appease him on our own for rebelling against his kingdom, *we aren't nearly afraid of him enough.*

Proper *fear* doesn't lead us away from God but to him. It's only by him, through his offer of reconciliation that we can become citizens of his kingdom. The kingdom where *justice* will perfectly be dispensed and *peace* will be realized, where there will be no more *death* and no more *tears*. As long as we think we can escape the fair punishment for our rebellion against the King on our own, we are fools. But when God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, the *longing* of the world was realized. There was at last a hope to be reconciled with the King. Jesus was perfectly *right* in everything he did, just as we should have been. He was fully punished for the *rebellion* of all who trust in him, just as we should have been. And by trusting in him the great exchange is made: we get his *righteousness* and he takes all our *wrong*. We can be reconciled to God.

The ultimate question of the poem for us is this: *Are you truly wise?* Or are you trying to imitate the woman of valor apart from God? If so, though valiant, you will *never prevail*. You will be an *enemy* of his *kingdom*. All your striving will come to nothing. In the end you are seeking a prize that will not *endure*: your own glory, your

husband's glory, or your children's glory. Just like beauty fades with time so all you work will eventually *vanish*.

Buy wisdom, though it costs you all you have. Fear the LORD and run to him.

*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.*

*~James 1:5-6*

## Notes

### Aspiring to be a Hero

1. An allusion to Isaiah 55:8-9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’”

2. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, vol. 2, *Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 517-20. Some people contend that the woman portrayed in this poem is not intended to be an actual ideal woman but a personification of wisdom, just as lady wisdom begins the book of Proverbs. This study follows Waltke’s conclusion that the intent is to portray an actual ideal woman, though the wisdom she embodies as to be sought after by everyone.

3. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 516. Emphasis, mine. In footnote 112, Waltke summarizes Al Wolter’s reasons to classify this poem as heroic poetry as presented in his article, “Proverbs XXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn” published in *Vetus Testamentum*, 1988. This translation of the Hebrew phrase is the first of the reasons listed. Waltke’s own translation of the passages if found on page 10: “valiant wife.” Additional discussion of how the phrase can be translated is found on pages 520-21. Bruce Waltke has been on the translation committees for both the NIV and the NASB versions of the Bible.

4. *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies, 2006), Translation note on Proverbs 31:10.

5. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 516. All the examples that follow of places where words are selected with heroic connotations are listed in footnote 112, where Waltke summarizes Al Wolter’s reasons to classify this poem as heroic poetry.

6. C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory* (New York, HarperCollins, 1980), 34.

7. Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 14.

8. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 525.

9. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 526.

## Heroic Deeds

1. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 514.
2. Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (New York/Pittsburgh: R. Carter, 1847), 622.
3. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 516-17. Waltke notes Wolter's position of classifying this as heroic poetry which is "characterized by recounting the her's might deeds." This is contrasted with other ancient Near Eastern literatures which celebrate women only from an erotic point of view, it is also contrasted with the Hellenistic ideal of abstract wisdom (verses the applied wisdom of Proverbs), and finally is contrasted with the Classical and Hellenistic Greet literature which idealize a silent, "homebody" wife.s
4. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 522.
5. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 535-36.
6. D. Irvin, "Spin," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 599.
7. Irvin, "Spin," 598.
8. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 524.
9. "State and County Quick Facts," U.S. Census Bureau, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median household income was \$52,029 in 2008.
10. Irvin, "Spin," 598.
11. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 524.

## Victorious Endeavors

1. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 528. Waltke cites Al Wolter's work "The Meaning of Kisor," *HUAC* 65 (1994) page 103 to elaborate on the picture in verse 19. Here the woman grasps the "doubling spindle", a reference to her making two- or three-ply yarn out of thread that was already spun and reinforcing the picture of her skill and her industry.
2. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 526-27. In this quotation, Waltke cites C. Toy, *The Book of Proverbs*, (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1977), 545. Waltke addresses the dispute of how to interpret the phrase, "Her lamp does not go out at night." Based on other Scripture, such as Psalm 127:2, he argues that it is unwise to work late into the night and that this verse does not communicate her working all night, rather it

communicates enduring prosperity. Further support of his position comes from another Middle Eastern proverb, “he sleeps in the dark,” or “he has not another penny in the house,” which equate darkness with poverty. Jeremiah 25:10 and Job 18:6 also link the extinction of a lamp with calamity. Finally, prosperity represented by a lamp and calamity by its extinction is seen in Proverbs 13:9; 20:20; and 24:20.

3. Irvin, “Spin,” 598.

4. David Powlison, Introduction to *How People Change*, by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (New Growth: Greensboro, 2008), i.

5. Irvin, “Spin,” 598-99. “If she was very capable at working herself and assigning work to the younger women in the house, she might be able to provide each member of the household with two garments so that they could wear both at once in cold weather and snow.”

6. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 524. 1 Kings 4:21-23 describes Solomon’s table referred to in this quote.

7. Gower, *Manners and Customs*, 104-05.

8. Gower, *Manners and Customs*, 48.

### *Her Noble Purpose*

1. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 521.

2. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 528. The outline of the chiasm that follows is from Waltke’s commentary.

3. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 501-02. Some scholars question whether the attribution of Proverbs 31 to King Lemuel refers to the entire chapter or only to the first poem in verses 1-9. This study follows Waltke’s conclusion that it refers to the entire chapter.

4. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 534.

5. Carolyn Mahaney, “Peace and Order in the Home,” The GirlTalk Blog, [http://www.girltalkhome.com/blog/Peace\\_and\\_Order\\_in\\_the\\_Home](http://www.girltalkhome.com/blog/Peace_and_Order_in_the_Home).

### *A Trustworthy Ally*

1. Proverbs 31:23: “Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.”

2. G. Bornkamm, “Elder,” in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary rev. ed.*, ed. Allen C. Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 318.

3. Manfred T. Brauch, "Elder," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 679.

4. Examples can be found in Deuteronomy 21:1-9 which describes how an unsolved murder is to be handled, Deuteronomy 21:18-21 which describes how a rebellious son is to be handled, and Deuteronomy 22:13-21 which describes how to handle a man who slanders his wife claiming she was not a virgin when he married her.

5. Ruth 4:1-12 describes the process at the town gate where Boaz legally acquired Ruth to be his wife.

6. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1891), 481.

7. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 517.

8. Gower, *Manners and Customs*, 191-94. General information on the elaborate design for defense begins the section and the quote is from 193-94.

9. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 507.

10. Proverbs 31:11

11. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 521.

12. Van Leeuwen quoted in Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 527.

13. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 521.

14. Proverbs 1:7

15. John Piper, "A Woman Who Fears the LORD is to be Praised," DesiringGod, Bethlehem Baptist Church, 10 May 1981.