

THE TREASURED WOMAN

PROFILES FROM PROVERBS 31

CHRISTA BRYANT



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THE PROVERBS 31 WOMAN

PROVERBS 31:10-31

She is far more precious than jewels. — Prov. 31:10

There has been much discussion about the Proverbs 31 woman. Some of those discussions have been good and others bad. Whatever the outcome, however, many of those discussions have often led people to believe in a stereotype. Instead of seeing the Proverbs 31 woman for who she is in Scripture, they see her as a representative of an ideal perpetuated by our culture. To some, she is a superhero or Wonder Woman. She has the perfect family, the perfect marriage, and the perfect reputation, all nestled into the perfect home. To others, she is the antithesis of the feminine movement. She is a symbol of weakness under the overbearing rule of her husband. And yet to others, she is simply an imaginary woman, a literary device or a nice thought written into Proverbs with nothing relevant to contribute to how a 21st-century woman should conduct herself. In Scripture, however, she is a woman of virtue and noble character, one who was taken seriously by the people of Israel. She was admired and respected. She was a woman fit to be queen. She was a woman inspired by God.

Even though the treasured woman of Proverbs 31 was not an actual woman, her qualities are reflected in the lives of the women of Israel. Each woman mentioned in the Bible is there for a reason. Her decisions and actions made a difference in the lives of the Israelites or impacted the future for Christianity. However, for all of the honor bestowed upon these women in Scripture, they are also a lot like us. They faced trials and temptations similar to ours. They desired love and accomplishment. They were sinners and doubters. So what has set them apart? How did their stories end up in the Bible? It's because they feared the Lord. They are the Proverbs 31 woman.

Fear of the Lord can cause women just like us to overcome our doubts and insecurities in order to do great things for him just like the women of the Bible. That respect also drives us to be like the Proverbs 31 woman—the epitome of womanhood. God made women to be a beautiful, captivating part of his creation. Just like the women of Scripture showed the excellent nature of the Father in Heaven by aspiring to be the woman God envisioned, we too can proclaim His excellencies by becoming a Proverbs 31 woman.

THE POETRY OF PROVERBS 31

By inspiration, King Lemuel penned Proverbs 31. Perhaps he was recording the advice of his mother or a common poem of the day. Some people believe it was a poem written by Abraham for his beloved Sarah. No one is quite sure. However, the poem was beloved by the Israelites and recited by young Hebrew women for centuries at their Sabbath-day feasts. We do know that the passage details the kind of wife the king of Israel should choose, the kind of woman God wanted as queen.

We must also consider the possibility that the passage was written by King Lemuel's mother, a queen herself. If the passage had been written by a woman in a position of royalty, then we must also assume that the many attributes listed in Proverbs 31 are not just desired by

God, but also attainable by women. These attributes were not only obtainable in the days of King Lemuel, but also today. God has set before us a pattern that we can follow so that we can more closely align ourselves to the woman God wants us to become.

Thankfully, we have this blueprint outlining the woman God wants us to be. However, with that blueprint comes great responsibility that can also foster great doubt. As we look at this woman, consider all she does, and compare her life to ours, we may feel inadequate. Few of us consider fields and buy them. Few of us plant vineyards or make all of our family's clothing. So we must ask ourselves, in an age of the Internet and thirty-minute meals, how can the Proverbs 31 woman influence us? What was it about her that made her virtuous and noble in character?

And can I ever be such a treasured woman as her?

If we are to striving to be the woman described in Proverbs 31, we must first take apart the passage, find the characteristics that make up who she is, and seek to apply them to our daily lives whether as wives, daughters, or servants of the King. Only by finding the underlying qualities that the virtuous woman had in ancient times can we adopt them to the modern world. However, as much as the domesticity of the ancient world has morphed into the managing of a 21st-century household, little has changed about who a woman is and how God sees her. The virtuous woman of Scripture can be the virtuous woman of today.

The passage in Prov. 31:10-31 are what Hebrew scholars call chiasmus. This type of poetry was one in which the first ten lines begin with the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The second ten lines are the same ten letters written in reverse. Each line corresponds to its matching letter (see below). For instance, v. 10 corresponds with v. 30, v. 13 corresponds with verse 27, etc. The middle of the poem is v. 23. This is the central thought of the poem and the ultimate discerning characteristic of the Proverbs 31 woman. That verse simply says, "Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land."

- A. _____
 B. _____
 C. _____
 D. _____
 C.' _____
 B.' _____
 A.' _____

As King Lemuel was writing this passage, he was describing the best of what he was looking for in a wife and what we now know as the virtuous woman, the wife of noble character, or the treasured woman. However, the passage's main point seems to be a little anticlimactic, describing a man instead of a woman. In fact saying her husband sits at the main gates seems like a criticism to this woman who works so hard and has earned a stellar reputation.

Quite the opposite, however! This line is the ultimate compliment for her. By saying her husband sits at the main gates, the writer is emphasizing that her husband is well-known and respected. For him to be so well-respected must mean that his wife brings him honor and admiration. Her very life is one reason he is held in such high esteem. He values her and her reputation beyond the most expensive treasure!

As women, we all want that kind of appreciation and devotion from our husbands. We all want him to be proud of us publicly and know we bring him great blessings. How much more should we desire that relationship with God? To know that our very lives bring our Father both honor and glory and cause him to be respected at the "gates"—this should be our ultimate goal. Everything in our life should glorify God and point to his love. The apostle Peter states, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). By her actions and her demeanor, the treasured woman of Proverbs 31 proclaims the excel-

lencies of the Father, bringing him praise and glory and honor. Many women in the Bible did this, and so can we.

WHAT MAKES HER SO VALUABLE?

We as readers can be struck with a sense of awe at what makes up this ideal woman, and we can struggle to find a place in our lives where we can relate to such high standards. None of us are perfect, nor will any of us become the queen of Israel. But the qualities she upholds can be demonstrated in grand palaces, poor, tiny hovels, or the most demanding of all places: suburban America. Fortunately, God did not allow us simply to guess at what those qualities are or how to go about developing them in our lives. He endowed them in real women, in real and difficult situations, and recorded them for us in Scripture so that we may learn from them and ultimately become the woman God intended us to be.

The women of Scripture probably had very different lifestyles than we do today, but many of their struggles are the same as ours. They wanted safe, caring homes. They wanted children and respect. They wanted loving, devoted husbands, and they wanted to be servants of the Lord. The trials that brought these women hope and redemption are similar to our own: Hannah endured teasing and bullying by Peninah because of her barrenness; Rahab overcame a sullied reputation as a prostitute, Ruth grieved and took risks, and Esther faced personal peril by approaching the king and speaking out and up for Israel. These women all share similarities with the Proverbs 31 woman as they endured and overcame the challenges they faced. God blessed each of them mightily for conquering their fears and remaining faithful to him.

The Proverbs 31 woman has many attributes that we should cultivate. By reading the passage, we see that she is a woman who did not put herself first, but found her talents, abilities, and qualities and used them to serve God, her husband, her children, her servants, and the

poor. Each activity had at the heart of its accomplishment her desire to help others and love God.

Showing God's love to those around us can influence others, but more importantly, by doing the righteous and good thing, we reflect God's holiness. The Proverbs 31 woman does this consistently. In v. 11, we see that she has established a relationship with her husband that makes trust and loyalty easy. Her husband trusts her in all that she does for their family. She did not earn this trust by being flattering or manipulative, but by working hard, choosing the family's welfare over her own, and always being honest with him in all of their dealings. In Scripture, we read about Mary who also earned the trust of the Lord and willingly accepted the task of bearing his son.

In v. 13, we see she works with willing hands. Doing this while serving others is not always easy to do. Doing laundry or purchasing clothes for our family may seem like a chore. If we complain every time we fold a towel or tackle the growing laundry pile, we have not worked with willing hands. How are we to glorify God if we complain while doing his work? And even more laborious for us may be teaching a Bible class or visiting the sick, but she, the treasured woman of Proverbs 31, does it willingly. Her love for the people around her was greater than her fears. In the book of Ruth, we see one of the hardest working women of the Bible. She loved and respected Naomi so much that she was willing to work for her even without reward. She did not have to help Naomi, but Ruth worked with willing hands.

In v. 14, we read she brings food from afar for her family. She has thought about what to feed her household and sought to accomplish those plans. Her desire to give her family the best is not just bragging rights; it is making sure her family knows that they have received her best.

In v. 16, she considers a field and buys it. She has put a great deal of thought into the decisions she makes. She saves up for her purchases, and she considers whether those purchases will be a good buy

for her husband and family. No decision, important or trivial, can be made without considering the effects on our family, our relationships, and our faith. By carefully considering each choice, her family knows, and God knows, that it was made with the best of intentions. Mary and Martha were also given a choice when Jesus came to their house. They could take the time to listen to Jesus, or they could go about their lives. Mary considered her options and chose the Lord.

In v. 17, we see that she dresses herself with strength and dignity. Those who look upon her know she is someone that should be respected, and she has not been weakened by the trials of life. More often than not, our appearance is a direct reflection of our heart and mindset. If we want the world to know we are strong in character, we must present ourselves in a way that reflects that characteristic. Abigail, during a moment of great trial, presented herself to David with strength, dignity, and humility. If Abigail can take on risk to her own life, so can we.

In v. 18, we read that her lamp does not go out at night. She is committed to her family and their needs regardless of the hour. Her family knows that they can come to her, and she is prepared to meet their needs. She is ready for that 2:00 am call.

In v. 20, we read that her hand reaches out to the poor. She takes time to think about the poor, their needs, and finds ways to provide for them. In our culture, the poor are usually an afterthought, receiving out leftovers—the things we were going to throw out anyway. The Proverbs 31 woman, however, plans for the poor. She considers them just as she does her family and makes provisions for them as she goes about her daily tasks. In the Bible, we read about Tabitha, a woman who spent her time making beautiful garments for the poor. She honored them with her work and did not just cast out her scraps.

In v. 21, we read that she is not afraid of snow because her family is well provided. She is prepared for whatever may come in inclement weather. It takes great faith not to worry about what will come. In

an age when winter coats are plentiful, long underwear abounds, and wooly socks line the department stores, we tend to worry more about how warm our children will be. But she was not afraid. She knew the task was complete, and she set aside her fears. Unfortunately in today's world, we cannot always be prepared for the spiritual chill that may envelop our family. No wooly socks can prevent the trauma of being unprepared to deal with the storms of life. Rahab looked well into the ways of her household. She chose a foreign God over the gods of Jericho because she knew the Lord would protect her.

In v. 26, we see that the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She is a woman who is not rude and does not gossip. She is one from whom others can learn because she always speaks with kindness and guidance. She thinks before she opens her mouth.

In v. 30, we see that she loves the Lord, and she loves the spiritual above the physical. Beyond all of the things the world has to offer, she knows her commitment and loyalty to the Lord are what truly matter. Everything she does is not just a reflection of herself and her husband, but her Creator. Her fear of God is worthy of praise. As the queen of Persia, Esther had the world at her fingertips. She could have valued the things she had been given or the power she had. Instead, her fear of the Lord was greater. Her obedience saved the nation of Israel.

While these qualities and works of the Proverbs 31 woman may seem difficult to attain, the love and commitment she has for the Lord are not. As we read about the different women of Scripture, we will see that their love for the Lord is the common thread that binds them together. In the same way, love for the Lord is also the cord that binds together today's godly women. We can learn from the women of old, and we can encourage the women of today to be who God wants us to be. There is no greater joy than sitting with your fellow sisters in Christ praying, singing, and worshipping a powerful Savior. By putting Christ first, we have entered into that royal priesthood, and together we can proclaim the excellencies of the One who created us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is your first impression of the Proverbs 31 woman?
How do you think society sees her?
2. Which of the qualities listed do you most admire? Why?
3. What are some qualities of the Proverbs 31 woman that you would like to adopt?
4. How could you make them fit into your lifestyle?
5. In light of the Proverbs 31 woman, which of your qualities could use some attention?
6. How can you find ways to increase those attributes in your life?

