

## **The Valiant Wife**

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Proverbs 31:10-31

Happy Mother's Day! Ladies, I hope you get the recognition you deserve today.

I recently read on the internet there was a second grade class that was studying magnets. They discussed their properties and how they could pick up heavy things. The next day the teacher gave a quiz. One of the questions on the quiz said: I have six letters in my name. I start with "M" and I pick things up. What am I? Over half the kids put "Mother." That's recognition, but I don't know if it's the kind you want!

Well today, ladies, you will get some recognition, because today we are in between sermon series so we are going to look at a somewhat well-known passage that gives wives and moms some recognition! The Passage is found in Proverbs 31:10-31, if you want to turn there. This is a passage that the King James Version called "The Virtuous Soman." In the New International Version, which we will read, she is known as "The Wife of Noble Character." By the time we get to the end of the sermon, we'll call her "The Valiant Wife." We're going to look at a passage about this woman today. Now normally I like to walk through a passage verse by verse, but this passage is a little different. It's not really written in a way that encourages us to do that. So what we are going to do today is just read our passage about this noble or valiant woman and then we're going to look at three aspects of this passage. We're going to ask three simple questions that will help us understand it:

- 1) How we should regard this passage?
- 2) What is the essence of the woman described in this passage?
- 3) What should we do about this passage?

As we look at this today, I think we'll find out this passage has something to say to every one of us, certainly to wives and moms and those who want to be wives and moms, but also to the rest of us. So if you are a mother or wife or if you have a mother or wife, this passage has something to say to you today. Let's just take a minute to read through it. This is Proverbs 31 starting at verse 10:

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

*Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.*

*She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.*

*She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.*

*She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.*

*She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.*

*She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.*

*She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.*

*She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.*

*In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.  
She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.  
When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.  
She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.  
Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.  
She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.  
She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.  
She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.  
She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.  
Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 29 "Many  
women do noble things, but you surpass them all."  
Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.  
Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.  
- Proverbs 31:10-31*

We are going to talk about three questions as we look at this passage today, and the first question is this:

### **1) HOW SHOULD WE REGARD THIS PASSAGE?**

Different parts of the Bible should be looked at in different ways. A New Testament letter (which is very logical and cerebral) is different from a Psalm (which is more emotional) which is different from the book of Revelation (which is just scary.) So how should we look at this passage? What kind of literature is it? Let me give you a few ideas about how we should regard this passage. The first thing I would say is this:

#### **This is a mother's beautiful address to her son**

If we back up and look at the beginning of Proverbs 31 starting in verse 1, we would see that verse 1 tells us that this entire chapter was actually a prophetic oracle that was given to a king named Lemuel. We don't know who Lemuel was. His name means "belonging to God." Some people think it was another name for King Solomon. We're not sure. But whoever he was, this was a prophetic oracle that God revealed to his mother, who shared it with Lemuel. Lemuel wrote it down and the Lord saw to it that it was included in the book of Proverbs.

It's a beautiful chapter with amazing instruction from a mom to her son. If you read the first nine verses of the chapter, they talk about the importance of self-control and of having compassion on the poor. Now in verses 10-31 Lemuel's mom gives him wisdom about what kind of wife to look for and how to treat her.

This is a wonderful conclusion, a bookend, to the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs is all about wisdom and it's interesting. Although Proverbs is primarily a book where a father gives advice to his son, the book begins with wisdom being portrayed as a woman in chapter 1, and it concludes here with a description of this wise woman that really puts hands and feet to much

that's been said in the book about wisdom. So this really is a unique piece of Scripture. It's like an intimate conversation between a mother and son. It's a mother's beautiful address to her son.

### **This is an acrostic poem**

In other words, the first letter of each verse follows a certain order. In this case, the order it follows is the order of the Hebrew alphabet: A, B, C, D. Each line starts with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. By the way, this is why the structure of the passage seems so haphazard. You might have noticed that as I read the passage. It seems kind of random! You'll really drive yourself crazy if you try to outline it! That's because the organizing principle here is not the flow of thought. The organizing principle is the Hebrew alphabet! That's why it jumps around! That's one reason we aren't going through this passage verse by verse. So, it's hard to follow logically, but if you think about it that structure would make it much easier to memorize if you were a Hebrew girl or boy. In fact we might even call this "the ABC's of a Valiant Wife".

OK, so it's a mom's address to her son. It's an acrostic poem. Now one more thing about the way we should regard this passage, and this one's important. Ladies:

### **This is not a yardstick to determine your worth**

OK can I just cut you some slack here, ladies, if you're familiar with Proverbs 31? Many people read this passage like a checklist. They assume that Lemuel is saying "This is what a noble wife is like. If you don't do all this, something is very wrong." At first, that sounds pretty good. There are even people who really claim to be a Proverbs 31 woman! But here's the thing: As soon as you take a close look at the description, you can see that there is almost no one that can pull this off! The standard is about this high! In fact, to prove it I just took the passage and turned it into a checklist and called it "the Noble Wife Quiz." These statements are taken directly from the passage. See how many of these are true of you, OK? Should we have you raise hands? Just kidding. Just keep track of how many of these fit you, OK?

1. I sew my own clothes.
2. I made my own bedspread. (How about "I made my bed"?)
3. I have not made trouble for my husband, but have been beneficial to him.
4. I have recently planted a crop. (Kelley, your raspberries do count.)
5. I often initiate shrewd business deals. (Allison Brown, give yourself a point.)
6. I frequently wake while it is still dark to fix breakfast for my husband and staff.
7. I carefully choose raw materials to weave into cloth for my family.
8. I go to exotic hidden markets to provide gourmet meals for my family. (And no, Harris Teeter is not an exotic hidden market but Wal Mart is depending on when you're there.)
9. I stay up all night spinning and weaving garments for my family.
10. Due to my domestic prowess, my husband is a respected member of the city council.
11. I'm so organized that I laugh at the trouble the future may bring. (Anybody laughing?)
12. But I speak with wisdom and kindness rather than arrogance. And lastly,

13. I have been publicly praised for my character and domestic accomplishments by my husband, my children, and the government.

OK. Let's see how we did. Ladies, score yourself as follows (13 points possible):

- 10-13. You're a woman of noble character.
- 7-9. You're a woman and a character
- 0-6. You're a woman of no bull!

OK, the point of that little exercise was not to humiliate you. It was just to show that very few women can actually imitate this passage. You say "Of course, she's 'rarer than rubies.' Who actually lives like this? I mean this sounds like pre-prison Martha Stewart, right?"

In fact very few people have the resources to imitate this whole chapter. You have to have (1) real estate, (2) servants, (3) crops, (4) a spindle, (5) a loom, and about 70 hours in each day! But actually, I don't think this is meant to be imitated line by line. We're going to see that there is one characteristic that is the main point here, and it's something that's accessible to every woman here today. In fact, if we tried to make this passage a checklist, we would see that there are many qualities of a good wife that are mentioned elsewhere in Proverbs that are missing from this passage. So ladies, I don't think this is meant to be a line by line description that is to be imitated in detail. Rather, this is a display of the kinds of things a wise wife, a wife of noble character, a valiant wife might do. This is a display of what the wisdom of proverbs looks like when it has hands and feet. It's not a yardstick to determine your worth.

So that's a little bit about how we should regard this poem. Now let's look at a second question:

## **2) WHO IS THIS WOMAN?**

What is her essence? What is it that makes her noble, or valiant, or wise? Well, I'm not going to go into a lot of detail here. Let me just give you three factors, three descriptions of who this woman is. Let me say the first one might be a little surprising to those of us who are reading an English translation of the passage, and it's this:

### **She is valiant**

To put it in everyday language, this woman is a hero. Now let me encourage you to listen closely, because you have got to get this! You don't see this in the English, but it just illuminates the whole passage. Here's why I call her valiant: In Hebrew, the vocabulary of this poem has something very peculiar about it. There are an unusual number of heroic or military terms. For example when it says "Her husband lacks nothing of value" (verse 11,) the word is "shallal." That's the Hebrew word for "spoil," like "spoils of war." The word used for "food" in verse 15 that she provides for her family is actually the word for "prey" ("terep.") In verse 19, when she "grasps the spindle" the translators of the New English Translation Bible say "This is way too much word for just weaving. This is the word used in the book of Judges when a woman named Jaal grabbed a tent peg and drove it through someone's head!" The words "You surpass them

all” in verse 28 are a Hebrew term for military victory. These are powerful military words! In fact when you look at the actual title given to this woman, you know it’s been translated several ways: virtuous woman, noble wife, capable wife, worthy or excellent wife. The reason for all the different translations is that the word used there (“chayyil”) doesn’t actually fit the context. It’s usually a military term. It’s the word used in Judges 6 when the angel addresses Gideon, and there it’s translated “mighty man of valor.” This is why I think we should call her “the Valiant wife.” I think that’s the best way to describe what’s being said about her.

So this passage is just chock-a-block full of heroic military terms. Now why on earth does it use military terms to describe this wife and mother? Well, it can be a battle, can’t it, ladies?

The first time I ever saw this military language in this passage I was studying Proverbs 31 in a Coffee shop. As I worked, a mother with two preschoolers sat at a nearby table. As I watched her, I thought “I can see why military terms are used here.” She exercised constant vigilance. There was a chain of command to be reinforced. Pre-emptive strikes occurred and “restraining force” was used. And based on the behavior of her three-year-old, I’m pretty sure there was some “shock and awe” in store when they got to the car! It can be a battle!

OK, but the point of the chapter is not actually that you’re at war with your kids! So why are these heroic military terms used throughout this passage? Well, I think the point is simple: Heroic deeds are not just done on the battlefield, they are done in the home every day.

Alright, listen to me: Ladies, one of the main things this passage is trying to tell us is that God recognizes the value of what you do. Young moms: when you’re tired and you’re beyond the stage where you need a break, and your kids are throwing the spaghetti against the wall, and you’re asking yourself if what you do really matters and maybe your husband is acting like it doesn’t, and you don’t feel very much like Proverbs 31, but you are serving your family using the skills and resources that God gave you, God looks at you and says “esheth chayyil” (mighty woman of valor.)

You “Dual Career Moms” moms that work both inside and outside the home: When you’re struggling in life because you feel the need to be the perfect mom and the perfect employee and the perfect wife, and when you look around you at the other cool moms and the other rising employees and you don’t feel like you’re doing it right, when your kids are questioning your authority and your boss is questioning your loyalty and your husband is questioning your sanity, seriously when you’re struggling and thinking “I don’t know if I can do this. I can’t keep all the balls in the air,” listen to me: when you’re discouraged about who you are, God is with you. He recognizes the battle that you’re in, and he sees your courage.

I think of moms with special needs children and that incredible combination of always being on duty and facing difficult decisions they never thought they would have to face God sees that. I think of single moms struggling to make ends meet and trying to raise godly kids. And I think of those of you ladies who are not moms. This passage is for you too. She’s not called the Valiant Mother. She’s called the Valiant Wife (or actually woman.)

What this passage tells us is that God sees the work you do in a world that has been a man's world. He sees all of it, and he honors it. You may look at yourself and say "My life is not a smashing success." Maybe no one is really cheering you on. Maybe you're discouraged. But listen, God looks at you and says "esheth chayil" (might woman of valor).

The other day I spoke with a Valiant Wife, I mean besides my valiant wife! We'll call her Jean. She doesn't go to this church. Jean is someone that I know and have been praying for. Her husband has stage 4 cancer, and she is supporting him through that. You can see the weight in her eyes from that when you talk to her. When we spoke this week, she had just spent a week caring for a distant relative. This relative was a very difficult, frustrating person, even earlier in life. But now she is much older, and she has memory issues (Alzheimer's, I think). She has no one to care for her. No one but Jean.

So in between trying to do her job and care for her husband, Jean took a week off to be with this relative and move her (kind of unsuspectingly) into a care home, and take care of her belongings and of her pet. I could tell Jean was worn out and hurting for this person and wondering if she had done the best she could, and I thought about this passage.

God sees that. He takes note of it. He says it's every bit as courageous, every bit as heroic, as a soldier who holds a tough piece of ground in a raging battle. This passage is telling us that. Heroic deeds are not just done by men on the battlefield. They are done by women at home and in the workforce every day.

So when we think about the essence of this woman, the first thing we see is that she's valiant. In fact ladies, we have a little gift to commemorate your valor! Army women!

### **She is a good steward**

If you've ever studied this passage, it is very difficult to categorize this description to figure out what it revolves around. This is difficult because it's an acrostic, so the order is jumbled. It's also difficult because there seem to be parts missing, at least if we're trying to think of this as like this "perfect wife checklist." There are characteristics that other parts of the Proverbs ascribe to good wives that are not directly stated here, like affection or fidelity to her husband, not being contentious, and even attractiveness, her ability to captivate him. These are mentioned elsewhere in the book, but they are not mentioned here.

So when you read the passage, you kind of wonder what is the main point of this list? I wondered that myself when I was studying this passage, so I just took all the verses that are in this list and wrote next to them what characteristic they were exalting. Here's what I found:

Eight out of fifteen verses refer to her industry, the fact that she works hard. Others referred to her ability to calculate or to her business know-how. I think when you put these all together, the best way to express it is just to say that she is a good steward. A steward is someone to

whom resources are entrusted. The job of a steward is to make the most of those resources. So we see this term “stewardship” attached to all sorts of things in Scripture, from money to spiritual gifts to abilities to God’s grace. The idea here is that we are to make the most of the resources God gives us. That is exactly what this woman does. She exercises good stewardship over everything God has given her:

- Money (verse 16): “She buys a field wisely.”
- Staff (verse 15): “She takes care of her servants.”
- Time (verse 18): “She’s up early planning the day.”
- Abilities (verse 16b; 19-22; 24)
- Intelligence (verse 26): “she gives wise counsel.”

Children, ladies, you are a steward of your children. Notice that she feeds and clothes them well, but she also teaches her children to recognize virtue when they see it and to praise that virtue. She’s also a good steward of her Husband (verse 11; 23). She values him. She does him good. She enables him to serve worthy causes. He’s at the city gate. And by the way, her husband’s not a “good for nothing” who lays around at the city gate. He’s at the gates of the city because he’s a leader of the city. The idea is that his abilities have combined with her resourcefulness to give him a good name in the community.

She is even a good steward of the poor around her (verse 20). She doesn’t see them as an imposition or something to be despised. She sees them with compassion, as someone God has put in her way for her to help. The essence of her character is that she’s a good steward.

So (1) God sees her behavior as valiant. (2) The essence of her character is that she is a good steward. Notice thirdly, there is something that drives that stewardship. There is something that guides it. In verse 30, we are told what it is:

### **She fears the Lord**

That is the summary this passage gives us of this woman. In verse 10, she’s called the Valiant Wife. In verse 30, the title she’s given is “A woman that fears the Lord.” This is the summary of who she is, because it is the guiding principle that gives rise to all the activity we see in this chapter. The fear of the Lord guides her. This is why her wealth is seen not as an occasion to retire, but as an occasion to help others. This is why she can laugh at the future, but she is kind rather than arrogant.

The fear of the Lord sets her goals: To provide for those around her, to teach her children to honor her husband. The fear of the Lord sets her boundaries, the things she will not allow herself to do. She is not lazy. She is no gossip. She is not proud. She doesn’t buy into get-rich quick schemes. She is no fool. The fear of the Lord has taught her to be the embodiment of wisdom. Because as Proverbs teaches us “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

OK so when we put that all together and we ask ourselves “Who is this woman? What is her essence?” this is what we find:

- She is valiant. That's the way that God views her
- The reason she's valiant is that she is a good steward of everything God has entrusted to her. She makes the most of all of it.
- The reason she is a good steward is that she fears the Lord.

So that's who this woman is. Now for our third and final question:

### **3) WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?**

The essence of this valiant woman is that she exercises good stewardship that is guided by her fear of the Lord. So how do we apply this passage? How should it impact our lives?

Well first let me say ladies, I don't mean to speak for you, but I think if I were a woman and I was trying to apply the passage, that's probably what I would think about. Rather than trying to make this passage a checklist to imitate, I think I would ask myself a couple of questions:

- Am I exercising good stewardship over the resources God has entrusted to me? Am I making the most of them?
- Is that stewardship guided by a fear, a respect, a reverence for the Lord?

That's how I would apply it if I were a woman. Notice that you can apply that whether you have kids or don't have kids, whether you are married or single. Whatever your state you can be a valiant woman in God's eyes. So that's how I would apply the passage if I were a woman.

OK, but there's a problem: This poem seems to have been originally delivered by a woman. It was written about women. But it was not written to women. This poem was written to a man. And men, there is only one command in this whole passage. Know what it is? It's in verse 31: "Give her the praise she deserves." That's the only command in this entire passage.

The passage starts out by saying "recognize her worth" and ends by saying "give her the praise she deserves." Men, there is only one command in this passage, and it's not aimed at the valiant wife. It's aimed at the rest of us! Starting with the husbands and moving on down to the sons and the daughters. When our wives (or any of the women in our lives) exhibit fear of the Lord and good stewardship in a life like this, we should praise them. Husbands do we do that? How do we do that?

In traditional Jewish homes, the father and children quoted this passage before they ate their meal on Friday night to begin the Sabbath. Kelley said "Was that as an encouragement or a rebuke?" Valid question! Actually, I think it was done out of respect for the wife to remind the whole family that what they really value is what God values. So how do we do that in our lives now? Here are a few suggestions:

First of all, husbands set a tone of respect and gratitude in your home. If you want to be the leader in your home, start by loving your wife. If you want your kids to respect their spouses, you have to respect yours. Teach your children to respect their mother.



When I was growing up, we were not allowed to be disrespectful to our mother. I know because I tried once or twice and let me just assure you it was not allowed. I'll always be grateful to my dad for the harmony that brought into our home.

Another thing we can do is just tell our wives how much we appreciate them. I've never seen a wife spoiled by being praised too much for the right things. So say "thank you" for the things you take for granted. In my home, it wasn't a formal thing, but my dad thanked my mom for just about every meal she cooked in some homes. The wife is never thanked for anything she does that's not right.

Pray for your wife and pray with her when she has a rough day coming up or when she's facing a situation where it's hard to do the right thing. Pray for her then ask her how it went.

The bottom line is: Men we should be treasuring our wives. We should be giving them the praise they deserve, privately and publicly. We should show by the way we relate to our wives that we share God's perspective on what is virtuous what is noble, what is valiant. This passage teaches us to recognize the good and treasure our wives.

For all of us (husbands, sons and daughters), we should be encouraging the valiant women around us. The passage says: "On this day and every day, we should give her the praise she deserves."

Let's have a word of prayer