

# The Proverbs 31 Woman

Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 2021-05-30

## Intro: even wealthy women can be women of faith

We are on number 8 in our series on Women of Faith. Last week we looked at a the widow of Zarephath who was incredibly poor (indeed, on the brink of starvation), and yet we saw that she became a remarkable model of faith. In Proverbs 31 we have a woman on the other side of the spectrum. She was fabulously wealthy. Yet despite that wealth (which many times does lead people away from faith), this woman exemplifies faith (and as the last verses indicate - the fear of the Lord) in all that she did. She was a steward who lived by God's Word and served the Lord with all that she was and all that she had. And the reason that is remarkable is that in the previous chapter Agur had indicated that both extreme poverty and extreme wealth can move a person away from living by faith. Both can be enemies to your faith. Well, in this series we are seeing how it is that we can (by God's grace) prosper spiritually in any state - married or unmarried (yes, single women like Martha and Mary do have a significant place in God's kingdom), whether in good marriages or bad marriages (yes, women in bad marriages can be women of faith who serve the kingdom), whether rich or poor. Paul said that he had learned how to be rich and how to suffer need in a way that glorifies God (Phil. 4:12). And I think the woman in this chapter is a beautiful example of that.

## Why the structure of this book helps us understand the book

Well, you know me - I love structures. I believe structures help us to understand literature better. And this poem has four pretty cool interweaving structures. And I want to spend about 15 minutes showing why understanding the structure makes the meaning jump out even more clearly.

It used to be that liberal scholars thought this was a disjointed and jagged poem that was artificially arranged around an acrostic.<sup>1</sup> But as soon as people realized that it is a beautifully crafted chiasm, everything changed from disjointed to being tightly and elegantly crafted. For those of you who are new, you may not know what a chiasm is. It is an ABCDCBA kind of structure with the A sections thematically paralleling each other, and the B sections likewise, and moving toward the middle. So the middle of the poem is the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the following commentaries see a disjointed structure and blame it on the artificial acrostic. Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899), 542; William McKane, *Proverbs, Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 665-66; and Roger N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs, Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 184

central theme. And today I won't preach through the chiasmic structure, though it is pretty cool. I was very tempted to do so. But I do want to at least introduce it. If you look at the chiasmic structure in your outline, you will see the parallels pretty clearly.

### **The Structure of Proverbs 31:10-31**

Proverbs 31 skillfully weaves 1) warrior poem, 2) acrostic poem, 3) linear progression, 4) and chiasmic structure together into a tightly knit whole.

- A High Value for a good wife (v. 10)
- B Husband benefited by wife (vv. 11-12)
- C Wife works hard (vv. 13-19)
  - D Wife opens her hand and gives charity (v. 20)
  - E Wife not afraid of future snow (v. 21a)
  - F Wife's household clothed clothing of honor (v. 21b)
  - G Wife makes clothing for herself (v. 22)
  - H Husband's success and respect in his calling (v. 23)**
  - G Wife makes clothing to sell to others (v. 24)
  - F Wife clothed in strength and honor (v. 25a)
  - E Wife is prepared to rejoice in future (v. 25b)
  - D Wife opens her mouth and gives wisdom (v. 26)
- C Wife works hard (v. 27)
- B Husband and children praise wife (vv. 28-29)
- A' High Value for a good wife (vv. 30-31)

Adapted from Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, The New American Commentary 14* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), p. 248.

The center of the chiasmus is verse 23, the declaration that her husband is highly regarded in the gates of the city. In the past this verse was seen as intrusion. Now that the chiasmus is recognized, it shows how this woman was the kind of wife that helped her husband be successful in life. Each part of the poem adds to the success of the man. No wonder the linear structure leads to a call to praise her.

The first A section speaks of the woman's worth, and the second A section (which is verses 30-31) also speaks of the woman's worth - but this time articulated by the family.

The first B section speaks of how much the husband trusts and recognizes the value she brings to the home. The second B section (which is verses 28-29) do exactly the same thing.

Just one more example. If you look at the first G section close to the middle. Verse 22 is the first G section. It says, "She makes tapestry for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple." So it is about her making clothing. The second G section also speaks of her making of clothing. It says, "She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies sashes for the merchants." Now, in Hebrew parallelism, the second parallel fills out and more fully explains the first. So those two taken together show that she not only made enough clothing for herself, she also made surplus to sell. Anyway, I don't think there is any question in anyone's mind nowadays that this is a chiasm.

And what is the central theme of this chiasm? It's not about the woman. It is about her man. Verse 23 says, "Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land." In the past this verse was seen by liberals as an intrusion that didn't fit the flow of

the poem. Now that the chiasmus is recognized, they can't exactly do that anymore, so even liberals recognize that it is an integral part of the poem, and it shows how this woman was the kind of wife that helped her husband be successful in life - not exactly something that these liberals are happy with. Each part of the poem adds to the success of her husband. So it is no wonder that the linear structure calls her family to praise her. You may think that the Western saying, "Behind every successful man stands a woman" is a corny saying, but it is not. It is Biblical. By structurally making the central theme be the husband and his dominion work, the author is showing that her calling revolves around his calling. Her makeup, clothing, food preparation, buying and selling, and everything else in this poem is done to pursue God's calling. And what is God's calling upon her life? It is to be her husband's helpmeet. That's the central message of this poem.

So this was a woman who exemplified what we looked at in Eve's calling to be a helpmeet to Adam. And we saw that this word helpmeet is a fascinating term. We saw that the word "helpmeet" is actually made up of two Hebrew words. The word for "meet" is translated as "comparable" in some versions and is a Hebrew word that shows equality with Adam. As to essence, the woman is the husband's equal; she is comparable to Adam spiritually and intellectually and in every other aspect of the image of God in mankind. She is not his inferior when it comes to image. But where "meet" deals with equality of essence, the Hebrew word for "help" deals with inequality of function and role. There is a functional subordination and a functional difference. And even the way this poem is structured demonstrates that. She is helping her husband in *his* calling. She is *his* helper. So the chiasmic structure gives a whole new perspective on what each verse means because each verse must be interpreted in light of that central theme. It's one of the reasons why I almost preached through it as a chiasm because there is so much that you can otherwise miss. But hopefully I have given you enough information that you will see the poem in a whole new light.

But this poem is also structured as a warrior poem - which is weird when you think about it. Daniel Noor brought this to my attention on Tuesday when he sent me a lesson written by Robert Rayburn. And as I started reading Robert Rayburn on this issue, and then went on to read other scholars who have pointed out the same thing - scholars like Waltke, Murphy, and Tremper Longman, it was pretty undeniable that this was written in the style of a warrior poem. Even some of the words are strange warrior words. For example, the word for "gain" in verse 11 is usually translated as spoil or plunder from war. Why would the author use that weird synonym for gain when there were other perfectly good words for "gain" that might have sound a bit more feminine? The word for "food" for her household in verse 14 is literally, "prey" (as in animals that are hunted and butchered). Likewise, the word "virtuous" means valiant, or strong. It's usually used of a warrior - *chayil*. So just as a warrior might be honored in song for his valiant feats in battle (an exclusive domain for men) this woman is being honored in a warrior-type song for her valiant feats in her exclusive domain of womanhood. It's the same word (chayil - valiant).

Though she is the weaker vessel when compared to the man's role and when competing on a man's turf, she is strong when she fully embraces *her* calling as a woman. Both men and women could be easily pulled by pagan cultures to abandon what is unique to their callings, but they valiantly refuse to do so. Let me read you some of the ways this Hebrew word for

“virtuous” or “valiant” or “valor” has been translated in other parts of the Old Testament. It is translated as able, activity, army, band of soldiers, company, great forces, host, might, power, riches, strength, strong, substance, train, valiant, valour and war. Now that does not mean this lady was a battle axe who was hard to get along with. But it is indicating that when a woman fully embraces her calling as a woman and is willing to operate in the areas of her femininity, then she is operating in the areas of her strength and God will add to her tremendous strength and influence; she becomes as it were an army or force of tremendous resources and abilities. Oddly, feminism is a flight from true womanhood that has lost what makes women strong. They want to gain strength, but they have ironically lost the very thing that could have made them strong. But I found it so cool that this is built right into the structure of the kind of poem that it is.

A third fascinating feature about this poem (also related to structure) is that it is an acrostic that is 22 verses long, and each verse begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is also 22 letters long. So some have spoken of this section as the A-Z of a godly woman, which for them means “Everything you need to know to be a godly wife.” But commentaries point out that it doesn’t actually give you everything you need to know about being a godly wife. It doesn’t. So the A-Z is not pointing to everything you need to know. It’s pointing to something else. It’s better to say that the A-Z of everything that this woman did was done in a way that did not deviate from her Biblical calling. It would have been easy to get lazy and let the servants do all of the sewing, cooking, charity, teaching, etc. And they no doubt helped her in those things, but like a good leader, it was not beneath her to do the things those under her did. She saw those things as essentials that she could not give up even though she was wealthy. Whether you are a poverty-stricken Widow of Zarephath or a fabulously wealthy wife of a statesman in this chapter, women are called to stay true to Biblical womanhood and reject pagan womanhood. They are to live by faith in A-Z of their lives - in everything. So that’s what the A-Z structure adds to the meaning.

But before we dive into the text, let me make one last comment. This poem contradicted the pagan ideals of Solomon’s day just as strongly as it contradicts modern feminism, transgenderism, and all the other forms of confusionism of today. We cannot brush this description off as being one woman’s accommodation to the culture of her day. No; it’s the opposite. Many commentaries point out how revolutionary biblical womanhood was in contrast to the pagan womanhood found in the Gentile nations surrounding Israel. This chapter was just as counter cultural back then as it is today. And God wants you women to be counter-cultural.

And by the way, it is not just women who follow the world on what it means to be a woman. Even Christian men do. They push their wives and daughters to dress, and talk, and live, and have the aspirations of the world - sometimes like the Victorian world and sometimes like the modern world. I mean, even some Christian conservatives tend to live more by tradition than they do by the Bible. And they think of themselves as the true counter-culturalists who stand against modern women’s compromises.

Let me just use Solomon as an example of how the world can frame our thinking when we backslide. In his youth he thought very biblically about womanhood, and his relationship with his first wife was ideal - as shown in the Song of Solomon. And by the way, that woman

was not a Victorian woman. She worked in the field. She knew how to have godly fun with her husband. Anyway, Solomon backslid (as recorded in the book of Ecclesiastes and toward the end of his life repented and wrote that book of regrets). Solomon's wisdom and wealth tempted him to stop living by grace and to start living by his own strength. And as Solomon became more and more out of touch with God, his view of women changed and he began marrying ungodly pagan women. The point is, his treatment of women was a barometer of his lack of walk with God. Like is attracted to like.

Just as another sidenote, the book of Judges demonstrates that you can test how close people are to God by how they view women and how well they treat their wives and daughters. The story of the Levite and his concubine is written deliberately in a way to make us realize how backslidden the Levite and his whole society was. Your treatment of your wife and daughters is a barometer of your godliness.

Back to my point, by the time Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, his first godly wife had died, and his tastes for women had changed, and he said that of the 1000 wives that he had married, not one of them was virtuous - not one. So *this chapter is also a call from God to us men*. It calls us to value what God values in our wife and daughters and to not allow the pressures of culture, pornography, or even peer pressure from other Christians to dictate how the women in our families are treated or even how they dress.

Well, let's dig into the text. I'm going to follow the linear outline in this sermon rather than the chiasmic one, moving from her worth, to her actions, to her praise.

## **How this woman's sense of worth helped her husband's calling (vv. 10-11)**

First, this woman's sense of worth did not flow from what others thought of her, from her actions, from her beauty, or any of the points in the next section. Notice that verse 1 does not say, "For the worth of her *efforts* are far above rubies," or "the worth of her *raising up children*," or "the worth of *xyz*" is far above rubies. It is "her" worth as a person; as a woman.

When a woman finds security in who she is in God's eyes, her husband is freed up to flourish. This first point is an essential point for women to settle if they are to be the best helpmeets that they can be. Insecure women tend to find self-worth in things that will forever have them bouncing up and down emotionally. God declared Eve's worth before she did anything. Let me explain. After declaring His entire creation to be good several times in Genesis 1, God says after the creation of Adam, "It is not good [those are shocking words in the context a perfect creation. After repeatedly saying "It is good... It is good... It is good" God says, "It is not good"] that man should be alone; I will make him a helpmeet." And he wasn't merely talking about loneliness or another male could have been his companion. And not even *God's* companionship was sufficient. There was something about the woman that was needed. God imputes great worth to a woman *as a woman* when He created Eve. For the first time, in Genesis 1:31 it uses the word "very." It says, "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good." Adam certainly felt that

way because, prior to her being created, there was nothing in all of creation that satisfied his need for a helpmeet. She was worth more than rubies, more than all the creatures that came before him. And get this - *she had that worth before she did a single act of service.* God's declaration that His creation was very good - *was declared before she did anything.* Her worth came from who she was in God's eyes and the role that she embraced, not from how much she was able to accomplish.

And that is important to grasp because one of the dangers in looking at some books on Proverbs 31 is that on occasion they will impute worth to a woman based upon how much she can do; based upon her performance. Well, you may not have all of the wealth that the Proverbs 31 woman had, or all of the servants that she had. And you are not going to measure up. And besides, what happens when you get aged and can't do as much? What happens when you are sick? What happens if you get disabled? Then you lose your sense of self-worth. In fact, that is the very error of feminism. Feminists have declared over and over again that the worth of a woman is measured by what kinds of things she can do. Right? If there is something a man is doing that a woman is not allowed to do, she feels that her worth is being attacked.

Elizabeth Elliot once said, "There is a fundamental and to me quite puzzling omission in most 'feminist' discussion - the failure to talk at all about femininity [in other words, what is distinctive to women]." (Elliot, *Let Me Be A Woman*, p. 60)

She says later,

We are not required somehow to 'overcome' our sexuality. We affirm it. We rejoice in it. We seek to be faithful to it as we seek to use it as a gift of God. Unfaithfulness to one's sex is unfaithfulness to everybody... The husband who is not faithful to his masculinity defrauds his wife, and the reverse is equally true. (p. 159)

We need to realize that ultimately, an attack upon God's definition of a woman's worth is an attack upon God and God's order. Elizabeth Elliot says, "We are called to be women [not men]... I have accepted God's idea of me, and my whole life is an offering back to Him of all that I am and all that He wants me to be. (p. 52, *Let Me Be A Woman*)

True worth comes when you embrace your calling to the Biblical model of womanhood. And as we saw from the meaning of "virtuous," true strength comes from valuing your unique role.

And even if you didn't know that the whole chiasm focuses on verse 23, verse 11 clues us into the conclusion that men flourish the best when women flourish in who they are. Verse 11 says,

The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain

There is so much that could be said on the security that both men and women have when both embrace their unique callings. But now let's get into the woman's actions. Some of them I will spend more time on and others I will fly through.

## How this woman's actions helped her husband's calling (vv. 12-27)

### Loyalty (v. 12)

Verse 12 gives loyalty to her husband as a key to his success. "She does him good and not evil all the days of her life." Loyalty for life is becoming a less common feature of our society. But this not just addressing a refusal to divorce. This is addressing an attitude of being for the husband, where the husband feels needed, respected, valued, and secure in her loyalty. Two massive studies that I read show that when this is present, there are very measurable statistical changes that happen to the men themselves. One study was done by George Gilder. He was primarily comparing the changes that happened to men prior to being married and after being married to a loyal and devoted wife. He says,

When a man gets married, the changes in his life go far beyond his immediate relationship. Statistically, his college grades summarily climb above those of more talented singles, his crime rate plummets, he pays his bills, and qualifies for credit. He drives more carefully and qualifies for cheaper insurance. His income as much as doubles. He becomes much more psychologically stable. Contrary to the theory that breadwinning duties account for high male mortality, he lives much longer than his counterpart who stays single. And of course, in most cases he devotes himself to one woman.

Dr. W. Peter Blitchington has also done extensive research on this subject giving the same conclusions and then saying,

No such important changes take place in married women. This is not to say that men don't have an influence for good on women. But male influence doesn't appear to be so intense and profound...

...the man who finds himself firmly entrenched within the safe haven of a family - secure in the love of a good woman - will find his role as a provider and protector uplifting and ennobling. His identity as a man will be guaranteed by his wife's devotion. His mental and physical health will be assured by her commitment and loyalty. Under her encouragement and support he will work harder, love more fully, and live longer than his single compatriots. Her influence upon him will be profound. Blessed by her presence, his work and his earnings will take on a new meaning. His existence will seem purposeful, and his tie to society firmer, as his life merges with her life. He will give her protection, and she will give him a home. He will make her a living and she will make him a man. Blitchington, p. 61 (Sex Roles & The Christian Family)

The point is that even pagan studies are recognizing the truth of verses 11-12.

### Researcher mentality (v. 13a)

The next phrase is interesting. It says, "She seeks wool and flax." The Hebrew word for "seek" is *darash* (דָּרַשׁ), and is much stronger than our English word "seek." The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament says<sup>2</sup> that it has the following ideas: investigating, searching, striving for, inquiring about, and paying detailed attention to. It's talking about research. This woman isn't just picking up the first piece of wool or flax that she finds. She knows about quality and is researching how to get the best. Martin Luther's wife started off her marriage dirt poor, but she used her wits to help the family get ahead. She researched

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<sup>2</sup> Wagner, TDOT, s.v. "דָּרַשׁ מְדָרַשׁ," 3:294.

and experimented on even beer and learned how to make beer better than anyone else. Well her research in that and other areas supplemented the family income.

### **An inward work ethic (v. 13b)**

The next phrase shows that this woman had internally embraced a work ethic. She doesn't just work when others are watching or when she is forced to. It says, "And *willingly* works with her hands." This is internal. It's a willingness to work. And what is cool about this is that, though she is a wealthy woman, manual labor is not beneath her dignity. And really, manual labor should not be beneath any of us. We speak of this inner drive to work as the Protestant work ethic because it presupposes an inner worldview that drives us to be industrious. I can't get into all that is found in the Protestant work ethic, but it is a very important feature of Western success. And it starts in the mind and heart.

### **Future oriented & seeing the big picture (v. 14)**

Verse 14. It says, "She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar." This is not saying that she herself traveled to other countries. Notice the word "like." This is simply a simile. And I believe the likeness is that her economics take into account the big picture and the long term vision. You see, the owners of merchant ships were noted for having to play the market on a macro level rather than on a micro level because of the longer stretches of time that were involved in delivering one set of goods from one port to the next and then bringing back a different set of goods from the other port back home. It takes some pretty sophisticated thinking and planning to do that. And it also involves a bit of comfort with risk. You don't get ahead if you are always playing it safe. If the prices of the goods they are importing and exporting changed too much while they were at sea, they would lose money. So merchant ships were required to have a long term vision on prices that spanned more than a year. And they were willing to use the internet (so to speak) and import goods from afar if it met the other criteria in this poem of value. All of that requires a long term vision. I believe it shows her to be future oriented, not consumption or present oriented.

### **An outward work ethic within the home (v. 15)**

Where verse 13 spoke of an inward work ethic, verse 15 shows this work ethic lived out in the home. "She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants." The word for "food" is prey, and may refer to butchering the food needed. Or as Tremper Longman claims, it may simply be an idiom similar to "the early bird gets the worm." But I side with those who say that she is literally butchering something. That is one of several reasons that this woman reminds me very much of Katie Luther, Martin Luther's wife. She butchered and dressed her own chickens, cattle, and pigs. She too was an early riser and was very industrious. Now, we just go to the butcher market and buy meat, right? I prefer that. I'm glad for division of labor, and this poem gets into that division of labor. I didn't make it one of the points, but it is there. I can't deal with everything. But having said that, it's probably not a bad idea to at least know how to dress a deer in tough times. This is definitely not a Victorian woman.



## She was entrepreneurial (v. 16)

Verse 16 says, “She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard.” When Katie and Martin Luther were married, they were destitute. But Katie knew how to buy low and sell high, and little by little she was able to buy little bits of property and keep increasing the livestock and garden. From the small profits she would make from selling vegetables and beer, she would buy more plots of land, on which she could grow more grain, vegetables, and animals. Their financial success was almost 100% attributable to Katie. She was a remarkable entrepreneur. And actually, a lot of the things that could be said of this Proverbs 31 woman could be said of Katie. She could be theological and she could be humorous. She was actually very funny. She knew how to play and knew how to work. But moving on:

## Physically in shape (v. 17)

Verse 17 says that this woman was physically in shape. “She girds herself with strength” is literally “she girds her loins with strength.” The loins are the muscles in the lower back. And since “to gird your loins” is a metaphor to prepare yourself, this verse means that she prepared her back to be strong and the second part is “she strengthened her arms.” So to put into modern lingo: she worked out. Some commentaries point out that within the structure of a warrior poem, this means that she worked out to be strong in her womanly duties just like a warrior works out for the battle.<sup>3</sup> She values her body and does not allow it to go to pot. She made sure that she was physically in shape.

## Discernment of quality (v. 18a)

The first part of verse 18 says, “She perceives that her merchandise is good.” The dictionary says that the Hebrew word for “perceives” is to have good discernment or judgment that comes from repeated tasting, testing, or other similar experiences to be able to discern the good from the bad. It’s used for example of people who can discern from experience whether a wine is good quality or not, or by feel and look whether a fabric is good quality or not. She has trained her senses to be able to quickly discern good quality from inferior quality. That’s an art that is learned. And it is an ability that should be taught to our children. Can they discern what is a good quality boot and what is a boot that will fall apart

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Waltke says, “The idiom, “to bind the loins” means to get ready for some “kind of heroic or difficult action,”<sup>156</sup> such as hard running (1 Kgs. 18:46; 2 Kgs. 4:29), escape from Egypt (Exod. 12:11), or physical labor (Prov. 31:17). The metaphor points to her psychic and spiritual motivation and preparation that equips her powerful body. Thus girded mentally and spiritually, she strengthens (wattē’ammes, see 8:28; 24:5) her arms (zerō’têha),<sup>157</sup> signifying that she both resolves to make her arm strong and that she has the strength and endurance to complete the task (la’aboda, LXX, see n. 79) to which she commits herself after prudent evaluation.” Bruce K. Waltke, \*The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament\* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 526.

in a few months? Can they discern the difference between good grain, beans, and rice from the stale product? Can they discern what constitutes quality fabric? That doesn't come naturally; it is trained.

### Prepared to not run out (v. 18b)

Verse 18 says, "And her lamp does not go out by night." This verse has been grossly misinterpreted over the years. It does *not* mean she works all night or even that she stays up late, or it would contradict Psalm 127:2, which says that it is not good to stay up late if you are going to be rising up early - and in verse 15 we know that she did rise up early. That Psalm says that you need a good night's sleep. Well, a literal reading of this sentence shows that she does not burn the midnight oil. In fact, it has nothing to do with staying up by lamplight at all, or it would literally mean that she never went to bed since the light never goes out. And there are too many women who have been put under false guilt through this verse.

Bruce Waltke demonstrates that the idea of a lamp never running out of oil is an idiom meaning that she never runs out of needed items because of poor planning.<sup>4</sup> There's always milk or whatever else is needed in the larder. This had not previously been the case for Martin Luther because he gave away everything so freely that they didn't have stuff. Katie was also generous, but she had to caution Luther that there are economic consequences of giving away your last milk - your own children won't have any. She was good for him. She made sure that they didn't run out of necessities. Her lamp didn't run out of oil - but that's an idiom for her never running out of anything because of poor planning. So, sorry, night owls, this is not a proof text for you.

### She has learned skills in the apparel industry (v.19)

This woman has also learned skills in the apparel industry. Verse 19 says, "She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle." Just as I tell men that they will be further ahead the more trades and the practical skills that they can learn, so too, women will be ahead the more crafts, canning, preservation techniques, and stain removing

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<sup>4</sup> Waltke says, "However, it is not wise to be active until late at night (cf. Ps. 127:2), especially if one arises while it is still dark (v. 15). Moreover, if taken at face value, not as a hyperbole, the verse asserts her lamp never goes out. Probably the clause is an incomplete, idiomatic metaphor meaning, she enjoys enduring wealth. To judge from a Middle Eastern proverb, "he sleeps in the dark," meaning, "he has not another penny in the house."<sup>162</sup> "her lamp never goes out at night" means, there is always money in the house. Toy, following Wildeboer, reached a similar conclusion from references to "lamp" in the Old Testament: "In a well-ordered house the lamp burned all night ... as a sign of life; its extinction marked calamity (Jer. 25:10; Job 18:6)."<sup>163</sup> In sum, her lamp burning all night signifies her enduring prosperity (cf. Prov. 13:9; 20:20; 24:20)." Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 526–527.

techniques, and other practical skills that they can learn. You might rightly think that it is cheaper to buy clothing than to make it, but that's not the point. There may come times when buying clothing is not possible. There may come a time when you can't go to the grocery store to buy food, and if you haven't learned how to can food, you will be in trouble. So this lady had been picking up all kinds of skills - including weaving and sewing. It doesn't mean that she didn't buy clothes. She probably did. But she kept up her skills of sewing.

## Not selfish, but generous in mercy ministries (v. 20)

Verse 20 shows that this woman is not selfishly preoccupied only with her own household's needs. She was also generous in mercy ministries. "She extends her hand to the poor, yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy." Where Luther would have impoverished his family with his undiscerning charity, Katie had a nice balance of being generous to the poor, but doing it in a way that did not enable the bad habits of the poor, or reward laziness, or in any other way be like our modern harmful government welfare. She knew how to be wise but generous in mercy ministries. Mercy ministries really is a skill that needs to be learned. We went through that in our diaconal training. What goes for mercy ministries in many churches is not good.

## Prepared for disaster (v. 21)

The next verse shows that she was prepared for disaster. Disaster can hit a community and make it paralyzed. This can be through snow storms, flooding, forest fires, or through other disasters. So women need to think about how to be prepared so as not to run out. This is not fear. Preparedness actually *alleviates* fear. Too many Americans would be in deep trouble if there was an EMP. Anyway, verse 21 says, "She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household is clothed with scarlet." The reason she didn't need to be afraid was because she had already prepared - just in case. In fact, I have a much more detailed chiasmic structure than the one I put into your outlines, and it shows this to be parallel with verse 25b - where she laughs at the future or rejoices in time to come. She faces the future with faith because she has done what she could and trusts God with the results.

A Spreads palms to the poor	v. 20
B No fear of snow	v. 21a
C Household clothed in scarlet	v. 21b
D She makes (' <i>as<sup>e</sup>ta</i> ) coverlets and clothing for herself	v. 22
X Husband respected at the gate	v. 23
D' She makes (' <i>ā<sup>s</sup>tā</i> ) garments and sashes for merchants	v. 24
C' Wife clothed with strength and dignity	v. 25a
B' Laughs at the future	v. 25b
A' Opens mouth with wisdom, looking after her household	vv. 26-27

## She beautifies her home (v. 22a)

The first part of verse 22 shows that she spends time adding beauty to the home. Are tapestries necessary? No. But they can be beautiful. And notice that she does this for her own enjoyment. “She makes tapestry for herself.” You husbands should not be only focused on functionality. After all, she is around that house more. Allow your wives to spend time and money on artistic flourishes and other ways of making the home more homey and pretty. This verse says that this is not all about you; it’s about pleasing her too. Part of Paul’s paradigm for husbands in 1 Corinthians 7:33 is “how he may please his wife.” Too many husbands don’t emphasize that enough. “She makes tapestry *for herself*.” And if every part of this poem produces a successful husband (the center of the chiasm), then allowing your wife some self-indulgence will ultimately benefit you men.

## She beautifies her body (v. 22b)

And this goes for your wife’s clothing too. The second half of verse 22 says, “Her clothing is fine linen and purple.” Waltke points out that both kinds of clothing mentioned here were very expensive forms of clothing - one being half a month’s wages and the other being upwards of two months wages for the average man.<sup>5</sup> Now, obviously they were more wealthy than most of us are, so this is not telling you to go into debt to get good clothing. But it is giving you freedom to enjoy good clothing if you can afford it. Allowing a wife to spend on herself is one way of blessing her. Now, obviously it is within means. We need to always keep in mind that this woman was wealthy, so we won’t always be able to do everything that she did. She had servants. Well - actually I think most of you have servants as well. What used to take servants to do is now done by technology. So if you have a washing machine, dish washer, phone, car, vacuum cleaner, etc., then your husbands have blessed you with servants. And I’m all about technology and appliances if they can free up our time to do other things. They help to leverage your time.

## She helps her husband succeed (v. 23)

I’ve already commented on verse 23, which is the heart of the poem, so won’t say more than to repeat that her goals in all that she does is to help him to succeed. As one lady applied this chiasm to herself, she asks herself how her clothing would fit in with his calling (is it appropriate to his calling?), how her food would fit in, and how her other purchases will lift up and encourage her husband. While Psalm 128 shows how the wife and children are the heart of the man’s home and he glories in them (so it goes both ways), this verse

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<sup>5</sup> “Verset B escalates verset 13a from linen to fine linen (ses), which was normally imported from Egypt (cf. Gen. 41:42; Ezek. 16:10, 13; 27:7), and from wool (13a) to wool dyed with red purple (’argaman),<sup>174</sup> also a traditional import. To produce this red dye was costly because it comes from a seashell off the Phoenician coast and so connotes wealth and luxury (cf. Judg. 8:26; Song 3:10; 7:5[6] and Ezek. 27:7, 16; Acts 16:14)” Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15–31, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 530.

shows how the husband and dad should be the heart of her home and how she and the children should glory in him coming home. So the two Scriptures speak of a mutual respect.

### **She has a home business (v. 24)**

Some of these last points parallel in some ways earlier points, so I will be briefer, but verse 24 shows that she has a home business or a cottage industry. Some people shy away from this, but I think this is quite clear: “She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies sashes for the merchants.” Despite being wealthy, she supplements the family income by her industry. Her wealth is not an excuse to quit taking dominion and to be lazy watching soap operas all day -a bad habit for anybody. No. She is a business woman and treats her home management as if it were a business. You women need to ask yourselves if the quality of your management of your home is so poor that you would be fired in any other business context. If so, you need to repent, regroup, and restart. She treats the plantation she manages as a business. Her whole life she is seeking to increase the family’s estate - at the same time as also enjoying the use of that estate. So there must be a balance between industry and pleasure. In any case, it might be worthwhile thinking of small ways that your wives and your children could supplement the family income.

### **Strength of character (v. 25a)**

Verse 25a shows that she has strength of character. And her character is so pronounced that it is not hidden. It clothes her. “Strength and honor are her clothing.” Her character exudes to the outside. It is noticed. Obviously it is only soaking in God’s grace and in His word that is going to produce that.

### **Humor, confidence, faith, lack of stress (v. 25b)**

There are different takes on the next phrase in verse 25. This version says, “She shall rejoice in time to come.” Another version has, “she is facing the future with a smile” (BBE). Another has, “She looks to the future cheerfully” (JPS) Another has “she laughs at the time to come” (ESV). Whether it is addressing her good humor, her confidence, her faith, her lack of stress, or all of those put together, you can see how such lack of anxiety about the future would bless the whole home. Some homes are not fun to be in because of the stress of the parents. True Proverbs 31 living can help to remove that stress; it’s not always guaranteed, but it can help.

### **Able to teach and to advise (vv. 26)**

The next verse shows that she has studied God’s Word sufficiently that she is able to give Biblical advice at any time. “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.” Wouldn’t that be cool to be so saturated with God’s Word that wisdom and law spill out the moment you open your mouth? The last phrase is *chesed* (חֶסֶד) or covenant faithfulness. This is not just words of kindness (as some translate it), but a woman who exudes the Biblical law of *chesed* she speaks Biblical wisdom, counsel, and advice. And we men ought to listen to our wives. But you women should not be so busy that

you don't have time to be in the Word every day. Find quiet time when you can be in the Word.

## Household manager (v. 27a)

Verse 27 summarizes what Paul talks about when he calls mothers to be managers of their households. Here it says, "She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness." The first clause strongly speaks of her being a household manager. To carefully watch over is a leadership position. In fact, one strong word that is used of mothers in the New Testament is the feminine form of the word "lord," which is translated as "lady." She is the lady of the home means that she has management of the home assigned to her. Another strong word is οἰκοδεσποτεῖν, used in 1 Timothy 5:14, which means to run the house with authority. δεσποτεῖν is a very strong word for lord. Our wives need to be freed up to truly manage or run the home. Of course, good managers report to the boss, and the boss has the right to correct and change and give guidelines, but a good boss doesn't micromanage. *She* is the household manager.

## Not lazy (v. 27b)

And of course, the last phrase in verse 27 shows that she is not lazy. She has taken seriously her role as a manager of the home, and this frees her husband up to sit in the gates of the city and influence society. Being a statesman was his career. It's basically saying that the husband is going to do better in his career when the wife does better in her calling. It's not saying that the husband isn't home. He is. But he is also an effective statesman in this case. And that is in large part because she is a valiant wife. She is doing her utmost to serve the Lord through her calling.

## Her praise (vv.28-31)

No wonder this Psalm ends with a call to praise.

28 Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her: 29 "Many daughters have done well, But you excel them all." 30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. 31 Give her of the fruit of her hands, And let her own works praise her in the gates.

There is a lot in there that I won't dig into - such as God's emphasis on character over beauty, and how the fear of the Lord characterized everything that this woman did, and how such a woman will even be recognized by the public as someone who is praiseworthy, and how she should be able to enjoy some of the fruits of her labors, etc.

But I just want to focus on how important it is that we praise our mothers and wives. Praise them for who they are as women. Praise them for their motherhood. Praise them for their works. And in addition to praise, pronounce God's blessings upon them. I think pronouncing blessings should be a daily habit. But so should praise. The worth of the virtuous woman is beyond rubies and therefore really beyond praise. But we should do it anyway. This was one area that Luther excelled in. Though he sometimes joked about Katie and she would joke back, he was seriously grateful beyond words for the gift of a virtuous woman that God

had given to him. I'm going to end with words from John Phillips that I say Amen, to. He said,

We can imagine Solomon's ideal woman growing old. Her husband has nothing but praise for her. Her children rise up and bless her. When she is called to her last rest, the family gather in the old home and the neighbors drop in to share their memories. The poor of the city gather at the gate and talk about what a blessing she has been to them. Unknown to everyone, the king has written down her story and the Holy Spirit will include it in His Book. Succeeding generations will read that this woman was called "blessed" and will wonder who she was. Many women will say, "I'm going to be like her." Surely one of them will be a young virgin who will live a thousand years later in a despised Galilean town called Nazareth; to her an angel will say, "Blessed art thou" (Luke 1:28).<sup>6</sup>

May that be said of each of our women as they aspire to be like this woman. It is only possible through the grace of Jesus. But it is possible. Blessed art thou. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring Proverbs 19–31: An Expository Commentary, vol. 2, The John Phillips Commentary Series* (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Pr 31:28.