

Mother's Day Message

Proverbs 31/Ruth

אשת חיל

eshet chayil

Introduction

Proverbs 31 gets a bad rap. You're probably familiar with it, especially if you were raised in a Christian environment, and if you are there are typically kind of two different ways that it is used. First, it has often used as kind of a "checklist" for what it looks like to be a godly woman and/or wife. Like - this is the standard. This is what a godly, complete woman is. So - be that. Especially if you want a man.

Another way it is used is as a way for men to have a checklist for what to look for in a woman. Strangely, we don't often pull the same kind of list for men in Scripture, but that's another message for another time. Men can use Proverbs 31 as a picture of what they're looking for - the ideal wife/woman. So if she doesn't check off all the boxes, or can't check off most of them, she must not be the one, and if at any point she seems to stop checking those boxes, she must have stopped being the one.

For mothers, this passage can be wielded in a way that makes you feel less-than, framed as this impossibly high standard that you can never really hope to achieve, even if it looks like all the other moms around you are achieving it.

If you're not careful, even Scripture can do this to us at times. There are parts of the Bible that we will read that can kind of just heap some guilt and shame on us - making us feel like we don't measure up and we can never be "good enough." For wives and mothers, and just women in general, Proverbs 31 can easily become one of those passages.

I would argue that this interpretation leaves a little bit to be desired. Today we're going to try to take a close, detailed look at Proverbs 31 to see if there might not be something else we could get from Proverbs 31, perhaps something a bit more hopeful and redemptive.

Proverbs 31:10-31

An excellent wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchant;
she brings her food from afar.

She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.

She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

She dresses herself with strength
and makes her arms strong.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.

Her lamp does not go out at night.

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.

She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
She makes bed coverings for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.
Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.

I. Observations about Proverbs 31

A. Author

1. King Lemuel
 - a) We don't know who he is
 - b) Doesn't appear anywhere else in Scripture
 - c) Probably not an Israelite king

- (1) Some have made the argument this is another name for Solomon, but there is not much evidence to support that idea
- d) Lemuel means - “devoted to God”
- e) So King Lemuel was probably some non-Israelite king or ruler in biblical times who feared YHWH the God of Israel
- 2. King Lemuel is not the author of Proverbs 31
 - a) This is an oracle or pronouncement that *his mother taught him* (v. 1)
 - b) So, Proverbs 31 was originally written by a woman!
 - c) This might change a little bit of how we think about Proverbs 31 knowing that it originally was something that a mother taught her son

B. Organization

- 1. Verses 1-9
 - a) We did not read these verses, they are an introduction that appear to be some practical advice before the real meat of the proverb begins
- 2. Verses 10-31
 - a) This section is a poem - a Hebrew poem
 - (1) I don't want to assume knowledge on your part - the Bible was not originally written in English
 - (a) The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with some Aramaic), and the NT was written in Greek
 - (b) What you are holding in your hands is the result of years of work and scholarly study, translating and comparing with original sources, so that we can hold a Bible written in our language that is trustworthy to reveal God to us
 - (2) BUT - because it was not originally written in English, some we can't expect Hebrew poetry to be like English poetry!
 - (a) In English poetry typically we think of rhyming sounds - “Roses are red, violets are blue, if we were chased by a bear I would outrun you.”
 - (b) But in Hebrew poetry is marked by the rhyming of *ideas*

- (c) That's why we can call Proverbs 31:10-31 a poem even if it doesn't sound like it rhymes in English and wouldn't sound like it rhymes in the original Hebrew language
- b) Verses 10-31 is a poem centered around the idea of a virtuous wife
- c) This poem is beautiful in its descriptions of this virtuous wife, but it also an artistic masterpiece
 - (1) I'm going to show it written out on the screen behind me
 - (2) Each line of the poem starts with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet
 - (3) For instance, the first line "A virtuous wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels" begins with the Hebrew letter *aleph*. The second line begins with the next Hebrew letter, *bet*, and on it goes until the the last line which begins with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *tav*
 - (4) It would be like you challenging yourself to write a poem whose first line begins with A, the second with B, the third with C, and so on and so forth until you reach Z.
 - (5) It is clear that is this supposed to be a distinct, beautiful poem devoted to praise of this "virtuous wife"

C. Usage

1. This poem has been used within Jewish life for many years
2. Interestingly enough - it is not usually used to instruct young women in the kind of woman they should be, or even to give young men a picture of the kind of wife to look for
3. Traditionally, Proverbs 31:10-31 was memorized by Jewish men, who would recite or sing the poem on a weekly basis, giving thanks for the women in their lives.
 - a) This may have fallen out practice, but there are still some Jewish people that keep up the tradition even today
4. They take v. 31 ("give her the fruit of her hands, let her works praise her in the gates" literally to mean that the purpose of this poem was a way for men to give thanks for the virtuous women in their lives - and they did not limit it to just their wives!

- a) They saw the only instructive part of the poem as directed toward men - to give thanks for the women in their life

D. One final observation

1. There is a word, a phrase really, that occurs in verse 10 of Proverbs 31. It looks like this, and in Hebrew it is pronounced (with my SWVA flair) - *eshet chayil*
 - a) This is the phrase translated in your Bible as “excellent wife,” “wife of noble character,” or “virtuous woman,” or sometimes, my personal favorite “a woman of valor” - the word for woman and wife is the same word in Hebrew
 - b) In fact, in Jewish tradition, this phrase became the name of the poem. They call Proverbs 31:10-31 the “*eshet chayil*” and this is the poem that the men recite to give thanks for the *eshet chayils* in their life, the “virtuous women” in their life
2. However, there is an interesting fact about this Hebrew phrase. Outside of the book of Proverbs, it only shows up in one place in the entire Old Testament. I don’t know if you’ve seen the Old Testament, but there are a lot of words in there. So, there is probably some significance that this word only shows up one other place
 - a) And that place is...the book of Ruth!

II. The Book of Ruth

- A. The story of Ruth happens in the “time of the judges” in the Old Testament.
- B. During this time period, a Jewish couple named Elimelech and his wife Naomi were living near Bethlehem in Judah, the southern region of the land. There was a great famine in the land during this time period so Elimelech and Naomi decided to take their two sons and move to the neighboring land of Moab to find food - a non-Israelite nation.
- C. As they are living in Moab, Elimelech tragically dies. Naomi continues to live in Moab, and her two sons both get married to Moabite women, one of the wives is named Orpah, and the other one is...Ruth.
- D. They live in Moab for 10 years, and then both of Naomi’s sons die. So now, there are three widows living together in Moab, Naomi and her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth.

- E. Naomi then decides to go back to the land of Judah because she has heard that the famine is over. At first, both Orpah and Ruth go with her, but on their journey Naomi tells them that they should go back to their homeland, find new husbands, and start a new life. Finally, Orpah agrees and leaves, but Ruth stays with Naomi.
- F. Naomi urges Ruth to leave, but Ruth refuses. Listen to how this is recounted in Ruth 1:15-18:
1. And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. **Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.** Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.
- G. So Ruth and Naomi go and settle back where Naomi was from, near Bethlehem.
- H. So let’s describe what is happening really quickly: here are two widows, one and Israelite and one a foreigner. They have no children. They appear to be destitute, with no money to speak of. They are in a very vulnerable place, at the bottom tier of the social system.
- I. During this time of the year, workers were harvesting barley. As they would harvest, they would usually leave behind some grain on the ground and other people (usually poor people) could come and pick up that grain to use for food. This was called “gleaning.” Due to their desperate plight, Ruth takes the initiative to go and pick up after the harvesters in hopes to find food for her and Naomi.
- J. Ruth so happens to come to a field owned by a man named Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi’s husband Elimelech. Boaz notices Ruth, like *notices* notices her, and treats her kindly, providing her with water and food and telling his harvesters to leave a little extra for her to pick up.
- K. Ruth asks Boaz why she he is being so kind to her, and he tells her that it is because he has heard about her commitment to Naomi, her mother-in-law, even to the point of

leaving her own land and settling in Bethlehem. Between you and me, it seems like Boaz might also have been smitten.

- L. When Naomi hears that Ruth has been gleaning in the field of Boaz, she begins to think of a plan. In OT law, there was a concept referred to as the “kinsman-redeemer.” If someone was in trouble, a male relative of the family would have the privilege or responsibility to act in order to deliver the family from their need. Since Boaz was related to Naomi’s late husband, he could be their “kinsman-redeemer.”
- M. So, Naomi asks Ruth to go to Boaz and ask him to assume the role of kinsman-redeemer. I’m not going to go over the whole story, but it is kind of crazy. In the end, however, Boaz says yes, that he will redeem their family, and not only that, he marries Ruth.
- N. So, they all live happily ever after.

III. Ruth as the Proverbs 31 Woman

- A. For a moment, let’s focus on chapter 3, specifically verse 11
 - 1. This is the moment right after Ruth has asked Boaz to redeem their family, fulfilling his role of the “kinsman-redeemer”
 - 2. You can imagine what is going through Ruth’s mind right now. This is their last hope, their escape from a life of poverty and destitution, barely surviving. Beyond that she is putting herself in an uncomfortable situation, not just for herself, but for her mother-in-law, a woman that she has no duty or responsibility to protect.
 - 3. Listen to how Boaz responds in Ruth 3:10-11 - And he said, “May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.”
- B. The important part of this for us is verse 11, where Boaz refers to Ruth as a “worthy woman.” This can also be translated as a “woman of excellence,” a “woman of noble character,” or again my personal favorite, a “woman of valor.”
 - 1. You guessed it - this is our Hebrew phrase from Proverbs 31, *eshet chayil*

2. Here in Ruth 3:11, Ruth is referred to by the exact same phrase as the virtuous wife/woman described in Proverbs 31! And again, here in Ruth is the only place outside of Proverbs where this phrase occurs.
- C. You might be thinking, okay, so what? Unless you are a Bible nerd, this probably doesn't really matter to you.
- D. But here is why this is important: **Scripture appears to be pointing to Ruth as the real-life picture of the woman described in Proverbs 31**
1. This connection has been noticed and studied by people much smarter than me
 2. The Jewish people did not organize their Old Testament the same way we do. The books were the same but often the order was different. Our Bibles have it where it fits chronologically, right after the book of Judges. But many times, these groups would actually put RUTH after the book of Proverbs
 3. For these groups, it was like they saw Proverbs 31 as an introduction to Ruth, as in, Proverbs 31 was describing a virtuous woman and Ruth was saying - "look, here she is! This is what she looks like!"

Application

I. Ruth: a Proverbs 31 woman?

- A. So if that is the case, that Ruth is an example of what it means to be an *eshet chayil*, a "Proverbs 31 woman," let's compare Ruth and this picture of woman that we get from Proverbs 31
- B. If we were to make a scorecard, pitting Ruth and this description from Proverbs 31, it would look something like this:
1. Proverbs 31 - married, apparently to an influential man
 - a) Ruth, widowed
 2. Proverbs 31 - wealthy, has servants, able to buy and make expensive things for her family
 - a) Ruth, destitute, forced to scrounge for scraps from the field

3. Proverbs 31 - has children who “call her blessed” (wouldn’t some of you like it if your kids did that)
 - a) Ruth - no children
 4. Proverbs 31 - a woman whose life is together, a household running flawlessly, a family that is picture perfect
 - a) Ruth - a widowed, childless, impoverished foreigner in a strange land.
- C. There doesn’t seem to be much in common between Ruth and this woman from Proverbs 31

II. Ruth: A Proverbs 31 woman!

- A. This is a moment where sometimes knowing the end of the story can cause us to miss things
1. We know that Boaz and Ruth get married and live happily ever after
 2. We know that Ruth was welcomed into a wealthy home
 3. We know that Ruth had children
 4. We even know that one of Ruth’s descendants would be named David, as in King David, the most famous king in Israel’s history
 5. We also know that Jesus himself is descended from Ruth
 6. But try to remove all that knowledge from your head for a moment
- B. Because here is the thing: Boaz calls Ruth an “*eshet chayil*” a “woman of valor,” BEFORE all of this happens
1. When she was widowed, childless, destitute, Boaz still looks at Ruth and says YOU are an *eshet chayil*, YOU are woman of valor.

III. You can be a Proverbs 31 woman

- A. I’ll go ahead and give you the spoiler:
1. This is the same thing that your Lord says over you
 - a) When your home is in disarray
 - b) When you feel like you are failing

- c) When you just don't think that you're measuring up
 - d) Or when you really think that everything is going great and you might be a supermom
- B. Boaz saw something in Ruth that caused him to identify her and make this remarkable statement about her identity
1. It may have been the fact that she was a hard worker, that she was loyal, she was selfless, all of those things, but I think it is a little deeper than that
 2. It seems as if those things are all symptoms of what Proverbs 31 says is the most important thing - to be a woman that fears the Lord (v. 30)
 3. Ruth was woman that feared the Lord. How do we know this?
 - a) Think back to her confession in chapter 1
 - b) Naomi pleads with Ruth to go back to her land. She explicitly says for her to go back to *her* people and *her* gods, the false gods that the Moabites worshipped
 - c) What does Ruth say?
 - (1) "Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God."
 4. THIS is what sets Ruth apart. THIS is what makes Ruth special. THIS is the root of what Boaz sees when he identifies her as an *eshet chayil*
- C. There are many things listed in Proverbs 31 that can make it seem like the expectations of being a godly wife/woman are impossible
1. You can look at this like a checklist and be like - my life looks nothing like this! If this is what it means to be a godly woman/wife, I must be the worst ever
 2. But what we see from this comparison between Proverbs 31 and Ruth is that the message of Proverbs 31 is less about what you *do* and more about who you *are*
 3. Are you a woman who fears the Lord? - this is the root of being an *eshet chayil*
 4. Do you know God? Do you believe in God? Are you walking with God?
 - a) Have you made the same declaration of faith that Ruth did - turning her back on her old life with its sin and instead embracing a relationship with the one true

God? If so - you are a woman that fears the Lord. This is the identity you have been given by God himself.

Conclusion

The core message here is not just for mothers. If you aren't a mother, or a woman, you may have checked out, thinking, this is a Mother's Day message - I don't have to listen to this, there's nothing for me here. But even if we are specifically addressing mothers, this is a common human experience that I know you struggle with. The expectations that you put on yourself and the expectations put on you by others, the comparisons that you make between yourself and others, this is something that each person has to work through. And the worst thing that can happen is that you would begin to think because your life doesn't look like everyone else's life, you are a failure, you're stuck, you've been left behind as everyone else has moved on to their happy and fulfilling lives. Because God has you in a specific place, maybe a different place than other people, you are of less value, or maybe you're doing something wrong.

Men, women, people in all stages of life experience feelings like this, at times. Maybe some of you aren't married, but you want to be, and you can't figure out why that hasn't happened for you yet. Perhaps you want kids and that hasn't happened for you yet, and you can't figure out why. Everyone else seems to be moving ahead with their lives and you just kind of feel...stuck. Or maybe you are married with kids but your family isn't exactly how you expected it to be. It isn't bad but it is...different. Maybe a little, or a lot, messy. Even apart from kids, marriage, family, anything like that, your life just might feel like it isn't as "put-together" as you might like. And maybe that makes you question whether you really are able to live a life that's pleasing to God, a fulfilling life.

But here, in this common human experience, is where the good news of the gospel comes to bear. The gospel isn't just good news when it saves you, it continues to be good news as it *sustains* you. The gospel speaks an identity over you that no one and no thing can take away. The gospel declares that you are a child of the Most High, Creator God, the one who spoke the universe into

existence and yet knows you by your name. The one who counted every hair on your head as he formed you in your mother's womb, and still counts them as they fall off your head when you grow old. This God who *is* love, and who is not ashamed of you for he has drawn you into relationship with himself in repentance and faith.

So wherever you are this morning, you women of valor, you God-fearing women, whether you are grieving over part of your identity that feels unfulfilled, struggling with a situation that seems like it has no solution, or even if you feel like you are living your dream, and especially today if you have been given the special, wonderful gift of motherhood, I want to close by just giving thanks to God for you. Moms, I hope you feel celebrated today, and every day. I know so many of you in here fear the Lord, love the Lord, and are committed to following the Lord. This is the foundation of being an *eshet chayil*. At times your life may look like the one from Proverbs 31 (merchants from afar), and at times your life may look more like Ruth's early days. But my prayer for you is that this Mother's Day, and the other 364 days of the year, you can rest in the identity that your Father has given you as his beloved daughter - an *eshet chayil*, a woman of valor, a woman that fears the Lord.

“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”