

Proverbs 31 // A Noble Wife

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[0:00] So we're in Proverbs 31, which can be found on page 668 in the Church Bibles.!

Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers. Do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings.

It is not for kings, Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.

Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish. Let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and the needy.

[1:20] 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 night. She provides food for her family, and portions for her female servants. 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.

[2:24] 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.

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.

[3:26] Honour her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate. Well, thanks so much for reading, and good evening everyone.

Please keep that passage open in your Bibles, and let me pray as we come to God's word.

Heavenly Father, we're so thankful for having your word in our own language, and the freedom to gather around it and learn from you.

And we pray, pray please this evening, that you will help us to be wise, to learn wisdom, to live wisely, and to trust your wise king.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. Well, this is the last in our series, short series in the book of Proverbs. And fittingly, it's the very last passage in the book of Proverbs.

It's the conclusion, the finale, the ta-da of the symphony. This is the point at which the big lessons of the book are going to be hammered home and summed up.

[4:38] And so we're going to try and think this evening about how does this passage work as the finale to this wonderful book. And what are the big things that the writer of Proverbs wants to hammer home as he closes?

One of the things that a good conclusion does is it takes you back to the beginning. And it helps you to explore what's happened on the journey since the beginning.

Well, this conclusion does exactly that. Look at verse one. The sayings of King Lemuel, an inspired utterance his mother taught him.

Now, we've absolutely no idea who Lemuel was, historically speaking. Probably a foreign king.

What we do know is he learned something from his mum. And he can still remember it.

And that takes us back to the beginning of this book. Because the book of Proverbs starts off with words. From a father, a king, to a not yet grown up son.

[5 : 42] Someone who will be king one day, but isn't king yet. So it starts and ends with parental words to a future king. And the first few chapters instruct the not yet king to seek, to learn, to pursue, to find wisdom.

And given that these words are for a youthful king's son, wisdom and its opposite, folly, are personified in this book in female terms.

The early chapters present us with two female characters. Wisdom and folly. Both of them attractive, though in different ways.

Who call out to the immature. The naive young man for his attention. Which will he choose? Whose words will he heed?

What path will his feet tread in life? Whose house is he going to enter? Whose bed is he going to sleep in? Where will he dwell? With wisdom or with folly?

[6 : 52] To live in one house will bring life. To dwell in the other will bring destruction. Will he be wise? Or will he be a fool?

Now in general, Israel's kings were not wise men. And notable features of their lack of wisdom were use of privilege for their own benefits.

And very poor choices when it came to wives. If you remember, Solomon's choice of foreign wives turned his heart away from serving the Lord. Ahab's marriage to a foreign wife made him the importer of Baal worship into Israel.

Lemuel's mum warned him against precisely those things. Abuse of privilege and choice of wife. Look at the shape of this chapter for a moment.

If we can have the slide up. It goes a bit like this. There's a nice symmetry to chapter 31. Listen, Lemuel. Do not spend your time on ruinous women who will sap your strength.

[7 : 58] Do not use your mouth for drinking alcohol and getting really drunk and forgetting your responsibilities. Drunkenness, Lemuel, is for people who are desperate and despairing to escape.

But, use your mouth for speaking righteousness and justice. And what about a noble wife? Clothed with strength rather than a strength-sapping wife.

That's the shape of the chapter really. Now we don't have to look far in life, do we, in any age to see that privileges are often abused. Lives are often wasted with their opportunities to do good for people.

Lemuel's mum knew a thing or two. But notice what gets the airtime in this maternal lesson. The thing that will most shape a king is who he's married to.

And a king in the ancient world couldn't possibly be unmarried for all sorts of political and social reasons. The thing that will most determine whether he uses his privileges for the good of others or squanders them will be the person closest to him.

[9 : 13] And as then, so now. We do not have to look far to see that princes can make wise or foolish marriage choices with massive effect.

Now let's pause for a moment. You might be thinking, hang on, I'm not a king. I'm never going to be a king. And I'm never going to have massive power. I don't think there are any future kings in the room this evening.

If you are, you're keeping it very, very quiet from everyone. But the vast majority of us will never be destitute and completely powerless. And we will therefore have the ability to use our mouth in ways that is good for people or not.

And many of us aren't married. But the particular marriage emphasis of this passage reflects a much broader truth that runs all the way through this book.

That one of the things that most makes you who you are is whom you pursue relationship with in life. Who you want to be with. Who you want to hang out with.

[10 : 22] The friendships you invest in. The people whose words you listen to. Those whose approval you crave. The ones you really don't want to disappoint. The ones you devote yourself to.

The ones you entrust yourself to. Who are they in life? We're all familiar, I think, with that slogan, people make Glasgow.

Just as a little digression, I often wish I could come along with a great spray can and put after it, people make Glasgow what? What do they make Glasgow?

Proverbs says, people make you. Those closest to us in life influence us profoundly, make us more or less wise.

Flipping it round, we make those closest to us more or less wise. It's just inevitable given the social nature of human beings.

[11:23] Well, with that in mind, let's zoom in on the heart of this passage, the wife of noble character. By this point in the talk, you may already be saying to yourself, I'm not sure I've made very wise choices in life already.

I can think of loads of bad ones. And I'm far from sure that I'm a wise person and good for others. And the woman portrayed here looks at first glance so superhumanly together that I'm already despairing of being a wise wife or husband or human being in any relational capacity.

If that's you, take heart for this is an optimistic passage. In a book that says lots about our capacity for folly, we end on a positive vision of wisdom.

Perhaps it's possible to be truly wise. And in a book that's all too aware of the folly of Israel's kings, we end with a picture of a really wise choice of marriage partner for a king.

Perhaps it's possible for a wise king to come along someday. It's also a really practical and constructive passage. You see, wisdom is a bit of an abstract concept.

[12:31] What does it look like to be wise? Well, this chapter paints a picture of what wisdom might actually look like in a life. And I think you'll find that it puts wisdom within the reach of an ordinary person.

And it emphasizes the massive usefulness of an ordinary life lived under God. So I think what we have here is a snapshot of the wise person.

It's for every reader of this book, whether you're male, female, old, young, married or single, a picture of what wisdom might look like. Now, these verses are structured as an acrostic poem.

That is to say, each sentence starts with a new letter of the Greek alphabet. So it's not arranged sort of topically. We're going to look at it topically by looking at bits and pieces from here and there. And we're going to look at this wise wife. Let's call her Sophie, just to make her look real. And we're going to look at her under three headings. We're going to look at her attributes, and we're going to look at her influence, and we're going to look at her driving force.

[13:40] Let's consider Sophie's attributes for a moment. Number one, Sophie is conscientious. She has no layabout. Verse 15, she's up early, doing what the household requires.

When the alarm goes off in the morning, she does not hit the snooze button five or six times. Verse 18, come nighttime, she's still doing what needs to be done in life.

She's obviously quite a well-to-do person as you read this passage. She's got a household to run. She's got a family and servants to feed and to clothe. Verse 19, thread has to be spun.

Clothes have to be made and mended. There are no cheap clothing outlets in the ancient world. She can clearly afford to buy things, but she's not sitting by a pool with a cocktail every afternoon. Verse 27, she does not eat the bread of idleness. And aside from the domestic necessities, she's also got a bunch of business side hustles on the go.

[14:47] Verse 16, she dabbles in real estate. And then there's the vineyard that she's planted. And verse 18, the trading that she does. Verse 24, the garments that she makes and sells.

She's certainly got advantages in life and privileges, but at no point does she use those as an excuse for doing nothing. Her hours are as long as those of her servants.

She does things. Things that need to be done. And beyond that, things that don't need to be done, but could be done. There are multiple references all the way through this passage to her hands, her arms.

She does things. There's nothing passive about Sophie. She's having a go in life with the resources that God has given to her.

Now, this is really important for us. You could read the book of Proverbs and become so worried about the possibility of folly.

[15:50] The possibility of getting something wrong, making a mistake, an unwise investment, or a poor business choice, that you actually ended up doing nothing for fear of failure.

And we do live in an age, don't we, in which passivity is a problem. And in which victimhood is sometimes viewed as an asset. One's life can be viewed as being totally defined by all those things that have happened to me.

Or been done to me. A passive way of looking at oneself. Now, of course, in every normal life, some very difficult things do happen.

And they do affect us. And we do make choices that turn out to be not sensible. So for various reasons, it would be very easy to become like the servant in Jesus's parable of the talents, whose attitude to his master made him bury his cash in the ground, rather than doing the really low risk option of taking it to the bank so he could earn some interest.

But Sophie is not passive. She does things with what she's got. She's willing to have a go with the things God has given her.

[17 : 08] Her time, her energies, her capacity, her capital, her income. She's conscientious. She's not afraid to do things.

Second attribute, she's charitable. Did you notice she's not turned inward on her home, her husband, her servants, her vineyard, her business.

Her activities extend outwards. Look at verse 20. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. Her energetic hands reach out.

And notice also her speech, verse 25. Her words are wise and faithful. And if you look back at verse 8, kings are supposed to be using their mouth for speech that defends the rights of the destitute.

The things God has given Sophie are not just for her and hers. She is fittingly royal in her charitable outlook.

[18 : 15] So, she's conscientious. She's not afraid to do things. She's charitable. She's not afraid to give things away. And third thing that's notable about her is her clothing.

Now, it's worth saying that almost nothing is said here about Sophie's appearance. Aside from the warning in verse 30 that charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting.

So, is she tall or short, slender or broad, particularly attractive or not? Who knows what's in the mind of the writer on that front? The value of this precious one, and look at verse 10.

She really is very precious. It's not measured by her face or her figure, but her clothing gets a mention.

First, there's the material clothing, verse 22, which is the product of her own industriousness. And secondly, there's the metaphorical clothing.

[19 : 21] Twice we're told that she's clothed with strength. Verse 7, I'm going to read it slightly more literally. She dresses, sorry, verse 17.

She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. And verse 25, she is clothed with strength and dignity. She can laugh at the days to come.

And the point is not that she's always in the gym sculpting her muscles. So, she has huge arms and huge legs. But the point is that her attitude to the Lord and to her life makes her unafraid of what the ups and downs of the future might hold.

She is clothed with strength and dignity. She can laugh at the days to come. So, she's conscientious, not afraid to do things.

Charitable, not afraid to give things away. And clothed with strength, not afraid of the future.

Interestingly, linking all of these together is a kind of underlying theme of confidence, unafraidness.

[20 : 33] Because she's not scared to have a go, she's conscientious. Because her ultimate security is not in her stuff, she's not afraid to give things away.

Because she's not scared of what the future might bring, she's strong in the present. She's unafraid. We'll come back to why that might be in a moment. Let's think secondly about her influence.

Sophie is just good for people. She's good for her children. She's good for her servants. She's good for the local economy.

She's good for those in financial difficulty. But most especially, she's good for the one she's closest to. Her husband. This is not the sort of wife who encourages a king to be drunk during the day and neglect his civic responsibilities.

To neglect the welfare of the poor in his kingdom. Or encourage him to worship false gods. She's a model of responsible living. Verse 20. She does exactly the things that a man with public responsibilities ought to be doing himself.

[21:41] Looking out for those who can't look out for themselves. Verse 11. She's thoroughly confidence inspiring. Trustworthy. Trustworthy.

A very safe pair of hands for a man with public responsibilities. He lacks nothing of value. She brings him good rather than difficulty.

And verse 23. Verse 23. Therefore, her husband is respected at the city gate where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. The implication of this verse being where it is, is I think this.

That one of the reasons he's publicly respected is the way she conducts herself. They're a great team. Her works bring her praise from everyone.

Her family. Her husband. Verse 28. And in public. Verse 31. She's just good for people. The closer you are to her, the more you benefit from her.

[22:44] Now remember, this is not just a picture of the sort of wife a would-be king of Israel might want to marry. And it's not just a picture for the sort of person a future husband might want to seek.

Though that would be a good idea. Or of what a future wife might be like as wife. This is the conclusion of the book of Proverbs because it's an example of what wisdom looks like in practice.

No matter who you are. And very importantly, her influence is because of her activity in life's ordinary things.

If you look at the activities mentioned here in this chapter, none of them, not one of them, is fundamentally unusual for someone who lived in the ancient world in an agrarian culture.

Not one of them making things, growing things, trading things, buying a bit of land, selling a bit of land, a number of different irons in the fire. This is normal life.

[23:52] The normal things of life being used wisely. And the thing that makes Sophie influential and good for others is not how unusual her life is.

She's not an elite athlete with fantastic levels of corporate sponsorship money to play with. Or a Hollywood actress whose last movie earned her 20 million bucks and she's got loads of money so she dabbles in philanthropy.

Or a tech guru who runs an addictive advertising tool and rakes the money in. She's not unusual. This is an ordinary life full of ordinary things and ordinary everyday responsibilities.

And it's massively good for the people around her. This is a truly wonderful thing. God has made us human beings in such a way that you do not have to have extraordinary circumstances in life or extraordinary abilities in life to be seriously good for other people.

Is that not a wonderful thing? So we've looked at the attributes of the wise person and we've looked at the influence of the wise person. Let's think briefly about Sophie's driving force.

[25:17] What makes her tick? What makes her what she is? We've touched on the underlying theme of fearlessness.

Not afraid to have a go. Not afraid to give things away. Not afraid of the future. How does that work exactly? Why is that? Well, it works because her fear is properly located.

Verse 30. Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Right back in chapter one of Proverbs we're told of the essential difference between a wise person and a foolish person. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. And the book ends on exactly the same note. Sophie is what she is because she fears the Lord.

[26:24] This is not terror but trust, submission. The recognition that above every material thing in the world above every material thing every personal circumstance whether good or bad every event that ever happens in life above everything is the loving rule of a gracious, creating and saving God who is in charge of everything and is directing everything towards its proper goal in the end and who despite the ups and downs of life loves and cares for those who depend on him.

One of the questions Proverbs asks is will there ever be a wise king? A king who makes right choices.

A king who uses his words and privileges to protect the helpless to rule justly. And the book ends hopefully with the picture of a wise choice of wife for a king.

Perhaps there will be a wise king one day. Well the trajectory that the end of this book sets is exactly the trajectory of the whole Bible.

Listen to these words spoken about Jesus. One who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

[28:05] Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. The Lord of the universe did not use his privileges for bigging himself up for his own advantage.

And, being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross.

The ultimate expression of loving generosity that the Lord of the universe should have given so extravagantly his own life to pay for all the folly and corruption of human beings.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

That wise, generous, merciful, saving, self-sacrificing king directs all the affairs of this world right now.

[29:33] It is really not possible to be a wise person if you live this fleeting life paying no attention to him.

That would be the ultimate folly. Back then, Sophie's fear of the Lord made her unafraid to act, unafraid to be generous, unafraid of the future.

Right now, the person who submits to, trusts, honors, follows, Jesus, can be assured of his mercy and free from fear.

Confident that the things he's provided and the circumstances of life all of which he governs can be used wisely and with great benefit for others.

Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we thank you for your son in whom dwell all the riches of wisdom and knowledge.

[30:54] we thank you for the forgiveness that he extends to wayward people like us. We thank you for the hope of glory and righteousness that he holds out to all who trust him.

Help us then to love, fear and honor him and live unafraid lives with all the things he's given us while we wait for his return.

We ask these things in his name and for his sake. Amen.