

Wise Wife

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[0 : 00] Tonight's reading is from Proverbs chapter 31, and it's on page 668 of the Church Bibles. We're reading from verse 10 through to the end of the chapter.

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. When it snows she has no fear for her household, for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

[1 : 18] 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. Honour her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good evening, St. Silas. My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior minister here at St. Silas.

[2 : 25] Great to see you. And if you could keep your Bibles open at Proverbs 31, page 668 in the church Bibles, that would be a great help as we look at that together. There's an outline inside the notice sheet, if you find that helpful, as we work through this.

But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let me pray for us. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you that you are a God who has not left us in the dark as to how to flourish in your world, but has given us wisdom in your word.

We pray that you would grant us that wisdom this evening, that we'd hear your voice and respond rightly to you, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, our culture forms our own instinct about what we would find attractive in somebody.

What sort of a woman does a man look for today? Or what sort of a woman is the right role model for other women? Well, there's confusion in our culture. One of my, well, basically the best TV comedy show ever.

I was going to say one of my favorites, but there's objective truth about this. Best TV comedy show, Chuck, used as its theme tune, Short Skirt Long Jacket by Cake, which is a song by the singer of Cake about the kind of woman he wants.

[3 : 45] Let's just listen to a clip of that, if we can get it to work. Jacket. I want a girl who gets up early.

I want a girl who stays up late. I want a girl with uninterrupted prosperity. Who uses a machete to cut through red tape.

With fingernails that shine like justice. And a voice that is dark like tinted glass. She is fast, thorough and sharp as a tack.

She is touring the facility and picking up slack. I want a girl with a short skirt and a long, long jacket.

There we go. So, short skirt, long jacket. It's a parody. The singer was asked years later what on earth the song meant. He was talking about how we seem to idolize in our culture a woman who's this kind of professional productivity machine.

[5 : 00] And so, the guy's left wanting a girl who gets up early and stays up late. A girl who, with uninterrupted prosperity, who uses a machete to cut through red tape. So, you picture her going around the factory, managing a business.

And then, by the last verse, she becomes this girl that settles down with him. And so, the song was just pointing out how the independent, successful woman that you want, she's not going to become this dependent, domesticated woman that you want at home in the end.

He was showing that there's this impossible dilemma in our culture. So, it raises the question, what sort of a girl should a boy want to be with? And what sort of a girl should a girl want to be?

Now, we've been in this book, Proverbs, all summer. It's a book that offers wisdom from God for life about how to get on well in the world as God has made it. And the final chapter of the book that we've had read by Earlene is a poem in the original language, Hebrew.

It's an acrostic, you know, one of these poems where each sentence starts with the next letter of the alphabet. And the idea is that we feel inspired by this woman we hear of, not intimidated.

[6 : 12] Now, I'm not a girl, so if you're a girl, I don't know if you'd ever find a certain kind of woman intimidating, okay? But for a boy, maybe you could think back to that girl at school who was terrifying.

You know, the girl in your class who was just so grown up and independent and maybe a bit rebellious. And she was effortlessly bright and effortlessly popular and effortlessly sporty.

And you were terrified of her. Well, the danger is that when we hear this description of the wife of noble character in Proverbs 31, we feel similarly daunted, unworthy, crushed by this woman.

And we're not meant to feel like that, whether we're a guy here or we're a girl. This woman, we're meant to see this woman and think, there's a woman who's really flourishing in God's world. And I just really want to be more like her with God's help.

So we're to be inspired by her, not to feel kind of crushed by how incredible she is. And we've got five points as we look at her. The first one is, the wise wife has a cracking husband.

[7 : 21] If we're feeling sensitive that Proverbs is describing a woman in these terms, we need to keep in mind just a few things. First of all, Proverbs has quite a lot to say about men as well.

And some of it's pretty negative. So Proverbs 31 verse 10, granted, is fairly cynical, isn't it? It says, a wife of noble character, who can find?

So you can't get a woman like this these days. But in Proverbs chapter 20 verse 6, it says this about men. Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find.

But why, at the end of the book, is this description of a wife? Well, partly it's because, even though Proverbs is written for all of us, whatever our gender, whatever our age, many of the Proverbs are written as though they're from a father to a son.

And so this is a natural way to end the Proverbs, as they're written to a young man longing from the dad that he wouldn't be a fool, that he'll make wise choices. So at the beginning of the book, we meet two women vying for this young man's attention, Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly.

[8 : 30] And he's being urged to choose the wise woman. So that by the end of the book, we meet a wise woman, this wise wife, and it gives us closure over the book that we hope the young man has chosen rightly and ended up aspiring for a wife like this one.

And realizing that that's the structure of the book helps us see why this lady is, this isn't just a sermon for wives. This is a woman that we can all learn from.

It's not just, you know, a sermon for unmarried men. It's like, oh, right, I've got my checklist now, so I know what to look for. Rather, whether we're a man or we're a woman, whether we're young, whether we're old, this wise wife inspires us to learn how to flourish in the world as God's made it.

But the reality is she does have a cracking husband. And so we get some aspirations tonight for husbands. If you're here and like me, you're a husband, be inspired.

The first thing about this man is he values his wife. We just have a look at verse 10. A wife of noble character, who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

[9 : 41] He values her, a Proverbs 31 husband. And that's a real contrast, isn't it, from lad culture today. If you just think about stag weekends, what's the mantra of a stag weekend or a stag night?

It's this is your last night of freedom. As though getting married is going to chain you up. You know, the ball and chain, the wife, she's going to destroy your golf game.

Your fishing trips are going to be ruined. That's what our culture says about marriage. But Proverbs 31, we see things completely the other way around. That the husband is being exhorted, implicitly really here, to see that your wife is the most valuable thing you have.

After the blessing of being right with God. So he treasures her in verse 10. She is worth far more than rubies. And next we see that he trusts his wife.

Verse 11. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. So he gives her the space to flourish. You can imagine this couple in the morning, they're having breakfast.

[10 : 46] And she says, yeah, I'm going into the office today. And I'm thinking of investing quite a lot of our money. And him saying, you go ahead. I trust you. I know you'll do what's wise. And thirdly, he encourages his wife.

In verses 28 and 29. If we just go down there together. Verse 28. Her children arise and call her blessed. Her husband also. And he praises her.

Many women do noble things. But you surpass them all. So husbands, can you work at that? Next time you've got a date night planned with your wife.

In advance, could you take some time on your own to write down all the things your wife is and the things she does that you should be thanking God for. And thank God for them.

And then on your date night, thank your wife for them. So I was thanking God for these things about you. I heard a phrase recently that getting married is the biggest.

[11 : 48] Marrying a girl is the biggest compliment a man could ever give a woman. And it's usually the last. Well, hopefully that wouldn't be the case of a Proverbs 31 husband. He's a cracking husband.

And his wife is valued, trusted, and praised. So why is she such a wise wife? Well, our second point. The wise wife fears the Lord. The key verse comes at the end.

Verse 30. If we just have a look down. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting. But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. That's what we've seen as the theme of the book Proverbs.

There are Proverbs about money, about words, about wealth, about work, about anger, about laziness, about honesty, about justice, about parenting, about making good plans, about generosity.

Proverbs about the whole of life. But we miss the whole point of the book if we still miss that the thread woven through the book is that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

[12 : 48] And the fear of the Lord is about trembling gratitude towards God. Not hiding away from him because we're scared of him. But rather seeing that he's there. Seeing that he's not silent.

Seeing that he's holy. And yet trusting his promises that we can approach him and know him and be right with him through Jesus Christ. So we live before him through life with trembling gratitude.

We walk through life with him. We've been reading as a staff team this book by letters of John Newton, the guy who wrote Amazing Grace. And let me just read a quote for you from John Newton.

Just listen to the combination that he sees in the Christian life of obedience and service and joy and communion with God. He says, The love of Christ is the joy of his heart and the spring of his obedience.

That part of the Christian's life which is not employed in the active service of his Lord is chiefly spent in seeking and maintaining communion with him. That's what the fear of the Lord is like.

[13 : 50] Living his way, doing his will and enjoying a relationship with him. And all the other wisdom in Proverbs flows out from a heart that fears the Lord like that.

And so the message to the young man in Proverbs 31 is that's the key to finding a wise wife. The woman that you'd want to be with. She doesn't have to be all the things this woman is in Proverbs 31.

This formidable woman. We've all got different levels of stamina and different gifts and different energy levels. But what we can all do, whoever we are, is fear the Lord.

So he says there, doesn't he, in those verses, verse 30, Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting. Charm is deceptive and it's still true today.

Charm deceives us a lot of the time, doesn't it? Deceives us in relationships, friendships, working relationships. And as a man, it can be easy to be taken in by a girl who's flattering, who takes an interest in you, maybe who flirts with you, who laughs at your jokes and no one else ever does, who flicks her hair in a way that you find distracting.

[15 : 03] But what use is that going to be for lifelong companionship and partnership? It's deceptive. Charm is deceptive. And then he says beauty is fleeting.

And there's so much pressure on us, isn't there? Especially on women, but upon men as well, to be physically beautiful. An advert that was banned a few years ago, you might remember, for weight loss tablets on the London Underground and on billboards.

Are you beach body ready at the start of the summer? All this pressure just to look a certain way on your summer holiday. But the wisdom in the Bible is beauty is fleeting.

That is, even if somebody is beautiful, or you yourself are physically beautiful, it doesn't even last. You won't stay looking like that forever. So instead, we should strive in ourselves to fear the Lord, to nurture an inner beauty of a godly heart and life.

That's what we strive for. That's what we look for in others. So I was chatting to Emma Connan from our church family on Friday, and she's just back from being away in St. Andrews, and she was asking how things are going.

[16 : 16] I said, I'm just working on my sermon for Sunday. It's on Proverbs 31. What do you think of that? She said, I love Proverbs 31. And I said, why? And she said, because here is a woman who is described, and she is totally beautiful, and yet we have absolutely no idea what she looks like.

It's great, isn't it? So men, if you want to get married, of course, there is an importance in married life to being sexually attracted to your wife. But, so that is important.

Don't mishear me. But some of us might need to have a word with ourselves to stop waiting around for a Victoria's Secret model to walk into church and get converted so that you can marry her.

And stop assuming that when that does happen, she's going to want you anyway. Because charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting. But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

And for all of us, women and men, let's be inspired by this wife. We're going to call her Ruby from now on. Ruby, because in verse 10, she's more precious than Ruby.

[17 : 25] She's worth far more than rubies. Why not for all of us? Instead of setting an aspiration that we want to be more popular, we want to be more charming, we want to have a better body shape or be more physically attractive, how about instead, we want to grow in the fear of the Lord?

So how does that play out in wise living? The wise wife has a cracking husband. The wise wife fears the Lord. Thirdly, the wise wife works hard. It dominates the description of this woman.

She's courageous. So even the description of her in verse 10, a wife of noble character, that word noble you could translate as valiant, as courageous, as brave. So for our single blokes, stop being so afraid of competent women.

Don't hide away from women who are brave and independent and successful. The wise wife is valiant. And then look at the example that she gives us all. So in verse 13, we find her making clothes.

She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. Then down to verse 19, that's continued. In her hand, she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. I had to look up what a distaff is.

[18 : 40] But this is her at the spinning wheel making clothes. And the point being that at that time, clothes would have been one of the most expensive things for her household.

And so she's being prudent and saving money by working hard. Look in verse 15, she gets up while it's still night. And look, there's no kind of Victorian idea here, is there, that a woman with kids is not allowed to work outside the home.

It's worth saying that is a choice that I think that as a church, we should honor and respect if a mom decides to work in the home and not out of the home. That's a wonderful thing for a family and for children.

But it's clearly not a rule because this woman is commended for her business interests. So in verse 16, 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.

[19 : 47] I think that last description there is not so much that she never stops working, it's that she has enough oil in her lamp. She's making sure there's enough oil in the home so that it's not dangerously dark.

She's ensuring that the family has enough. So she's prudent, but she's not so tight-fisted that she's not willing to do anything nice or enjoy life. So if you look at verse 22, she makes coverings for her bed.

She is clothed in fine linen and purple. And in verse 27, she watches over the affairs of her household. It's a wonderful picture of the godly life that's been described throughout the book of Proverbs, but it's all coming together in this woman and being lived out by her day by day.

The advert that was in the news last week that was banned for gender stereotyping, I don't know whether you saw it in the news, was for the Volkswagen Golf, the electric Golf. And I don't know whether you saw this in the news, but it was banned because they said it reinforced unhelpful gender stereotypes.

Because if you watch the advert, obviously everyone's watching it now because it got banned, that there are men doing very adventurous things, exciting activities.

[21 : 01] There are two male astronauts and then there's a male long jumper. And then it shows a woman sitting, reading a book by a pram in the park as an e-golf drives past. So the argument was that it was kind of all, the men do the adventurous stuff and the kind of the women don't do that kind of thing.

They just do domestic stuff. Now Volkswagen felt hard done by on that. And I think they did have a point actually. But you can see the nervousness, the reason why that stereotype, people were worried about that.

And we can see here in Proverbs 31 that there's nothing like that about the wise wife here. There's nothing passive about her. She's certainly caring and we'll see that next, but she's working hard in all kinds of challenging and exciting ways.

It shows us as well that the wise life, it's not a life of leisure, a life of just consumption. The wise life is one where we work hard.

And Ruby here as well is reminding us that wisdom from God is about the whole of our lives. Everything that we do has dignity and it matters to God how we do it.

[22 : 11] When we read Proverbs as a whole, when you read the book, there's very little, if anything at all, about what you should do in the temple. There's no mention of church, if you like, of kind of the people gathering to worship.

It's all about wisdom for the home life, for family life, for working life, for friendship, for government. And whatever we're doing this time tomorrow, whatever we're doing this week, whatever demands there are on us as students, as workers, as neighbors, as friends, it can all be done in a way that honors God and done as an act of worship to God, done wisely for him.

That's our third point. Fourthly, the wise wife serves others. If you just have a look at verse 15, she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants.

And go down to verse 20, And then she's concerned for her husband.

Verse 23, You might have heard the phrase before, behind every successful man is a woman rolling her eyes, which might not be fully true, but we could at least say that in the case of a married man, a wise wife is in partnership with him and is supporting him, just as he's supporting her as well.

[23 : 45] And we see that focus on what's good for others, especially her household. Maybe that's what helps drive that decision-making about working outside the home, working in the home, how much to do of each, is, well, what's best for others rather than for herself.

And I don't know if you saw in the news recently, the actor Hugh Jackman, who has defied Hollywood convention by having, so far, a lasting marriage, been married to his wife for over 20 years, and he's been asked about that.

And he said that whenever there's been a key decision for them to make, especially about acting jobs that he's offered in his acting career, he and his wife have always asked each other, Is this good or bad for our marriage?

And once they had children as well, is this good or bad for our family? It's very counter-cultural, isn't it? Because our culture around us says the most important kind of care is self-care.

The greatest love of all is to learn to love yourself. We like being told, treat yourself, you deserve it. And of course, the Bible does have lots of wisdom in it that I think our culture has ignored about resting well.

[24 : 56] And maybe that's why we're finding that we're done in and we're knackered and we start longing for that kind of thing. So resting well is important when we need to, but Ruby here inspires us with a beautiful picture of working hard for the good of others to serve them and flourishing in that, having joy in that.

So we've thought about three virtues, really, of the wise wife. She fears the Lord, she works hard, she serves others. And finally, as we finish, the wise wife is out of our league.

She is, isn't she? And I made the point to start, we're not meant to feel crushed by Ruby here. We're meant to feel inspired, but in reality, it is hard not to be a bit crushed by her, isn't it?

If you're a woman, especially a wife and a mum, maybe you read this and you think, I'm so glad I've never met Ruby. She can do anything. I hate Ruby.

And men, let's face it, if you ever met a woman like Ruby, rather than try and marry her, you'd be absolutely terrified and you'd run a mile from her. For all of us, Ruby is out of our league.

[26 : 07] Of course she is. But as we see that, it's a great reminder for us in the wider biblical picture that we don't have to worry about our own performance. There's a verse in 1 Corinthians 1 about wisdom.

In other words, he is the fulfillment of wise living in Proverbs 31.

The wise person fears the Lord, that's what we've seen. And Jesus, when he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, stuck with God and his word. And the wise person works hard.

Well, Jesus rose very early in the morning to pray. He healed the sick, raised the dead, traveled from town to town to share the good news of the kingdom. And the wise person serves others.

And then we see Jesus, see the crowds, and have compassion on them, because they're like sheep without a shepherd. And he steps up to be their shepherd. He says, the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[27 : 26] So we put our faith in him and God, he becomes our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. God looks on us as righteous in him. And the more we can grasp that in our hearts, the more it liberates us to see Ruby as an inspiration.

It liberates us to live wisely. We don't feel burdened by Proverbs 31 and its demands, crushed by the bar that it's setting us. No, rather, we stand in God's grace more and more thankful that we don't have to be like this and prove ourselves to God.

So that we aim to be like Ruby, not because we have to, but because we want to, because we trust that the Lord's ways are best and we know he's good. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this poem about the wife of noble character. We thank you for her embodiment of all the wisdom we've seen in Proverbs.

And we thank you for Jesus, your wisdom lived out as our righteousness holiness and redemption. We pray you'll help us to take this wisdom into our lives, into our marriages, for those of us who are married, that you would help each of us to fear the Lord, to work hard and to serve others.

[28 : 51] In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going to sing again. We'll, in a moment, be sharing communion together. And so we're going to sing a song that reminds us of all that God does for us as we have bread and wine.

Thank you.