

# A Balanced Look at Proverbs 31



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**H**ow practical is Proverbs 31:10-31 for today? Some say this beautiful but archaic poem was relevant for Solomon's culture but not for ours. Others take a literal approach, encouraging women to live up to God's paragon of virtue. She burns the candle at both ends by getting up early (vs. 15) and staying up late (vs. 18). With income from her manufacturing business (vs. 24) she buys real estate (vs. 16) while making clothes for herself and her family (vs. 21-22). Besides meeting the needs of her husband (vs. 11) and children (vs. 27-28) she helps the poor (vs. 20) and never neglects her relationship with God (vs. 30).

Neither view suffices. The first disregards biblical inerrancy, and the literal view exhausts us. When Les Lofquist encouraged women of balance to "reflect the qualities in Proverbs 31" (May/June 2016 VOICE), he invited the possibility of having a balanced view of this acrostic poem. We do that by seeing Proverbs 31 as a lifetime photo album of a godly woman's life, not a post of her daily activities. Thus by her senior years, assuming she is elderly along with her husband in verse 23, her virtue and accomplishments result in praise (vs. 28-31).

A balanced view results from answering two questions: 1.) Can the passage be outlined with reference to a woman's entire life rather than her daily chores? 2.) What comprises virtue?

Referring to the first question, Martha Montgomery, a home Bible teacher in Dallas from 1952-1992, identified the following literary structure: three verses of introduction, four concluding verses, and 15 verses for the three stages of a woman's life. Each stage contains five verses which include a statement about her household and a notation about what she wears.

The poem opens with a preview not a predicament (vs. 10). Like rare and precious gems increasing in value, this woman's character and abilities grow as she ages.

## THE INTRODUCTION (VS. 11-12)

This section highlights her husband-centered focus. In every stage of life her husband trusts

her and has no reason to look elsewhere for his needs to be met. She routinely asks—what good thing can I do for my husband today? (v. 12).

*The emphasis of Proverbs 31 is not on busyness but on usefulness.*

## THE EARLY YEARS (VS. 13-17)

She is home-centered, providing winter clothing (wool) and summer clothing (flax) and going to great lengths to feed her household (vs. 14). She puts her maidens (by application, appliances) to their tasks early in the day (vs. 15).

Some commentaries impose a real estate business on verse 16, mis-translating the fruit of her hands as "earnings." However, verse 31 equates the fruit of her hands with "her own works." She works with her hands, in a vineyard, where presumably she can have her children with her. Another unfortunate translation in verse 16 is the word "buys." This Hebrew word means "to take, receive, conquer," and hardly ever refers to buying or selling. She considers a field, not to buy it, but how best to use it, and then takes it over.

This early stage concludes with what she wears—strength—in her loins (childbirth area) and her arms as she runs her household effectively.

Although the passage portrays a married woman with children, single women can follow the example by having an organized home life and developing useful skills. Likewise, mothers who need to have a career should take care to focus priority on their homes and families.

## THE MIDDLE YEARS (VS. 18-22)

She senses her involvements are good. This most likely refers to shopping! In her culture she bartered or traded wisely (vs. 18). That is why she was prepared with adequate oil so her lamp did not go out at night. The burning lamp may also speak of availability, not lack of sleep. If her family or travelers needed her during the night, she was ready.



With her children growing up, she can be more help-centered in the middle years. Her hands reach out to provide for her household (vs. 21) herself (vs. 22), and for the poor and needy (vs. 19-20). Without guilt, we may postpone time for volunteer work and self-focused interests until the stage when our children can do more for themselves and help with chores.

Verse 22 makes another reference to what she wears. Fine linen and purple speak of dignity and honor. In the early years she developed physical strength, and in the middle years, she has strength of character, which brings her self-respect and honor from others.

#### THE LATER YEARS (VS. 23-27)

In the empty-nest stage, her husband sits with the elders, a position of authority (vs. 23). We may assume she is also elderly and shares his good reputation. With children grown, the virtuous woman can be more humanity-centered. She may have a business outside the home. Her expertise from years of making garments now generates income (vs. 24).

Again she wears strength (from the early years) and dignity (from the middle years). These qualities, ripened by life, fully characterize her now. That's why she has a positive outlook on the future (vs. 25) and wisdom to disperse with kindness (vs. 26). Notably, only one out of 22 verses mentions her tongue. Seven verses refer to her hands (or palms). People often remember what we do for them more than what we say. She watches the ways of her household (even from a distance) and does not become idle (vs. 27). Aging women must resist the urge to withdraw from helping others. We may be unable to do more than pray, but what a valuable ministry that is.

#### THE CONCLUSION (VS. 28-31)

This concluding section gives the virtuous woman's beauty secret—fearing God. Charm can deceive, and external beauty doesn't last, but godliness never goes out of style (vs. 30). The Proverbs 31 woman is praised by her children and husband (vs. 28-29), her works (vs. 31), and by implication, the Lord (vs. 30). We must concentrate our efforts on these four areas—being a godly mother, wife, worker, and child of God.

This leads to the second question:

### SUGGESTED TRANSLATION AND OUTLINE OF PROVERBS 31:10-31

Introduction: vs. 10-12

10. Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above corals.
11. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he has no need of plunder.
12. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

Early Years: vs. 13-17

13. She seeks wool, and flax, and works in delight with her palms.
14. She is like a merchant's ships, bringing her food from afar.
15. She rises also while it is yet night, and gives meat to her household and assigns tasks to her maidens.
16. She considers a field, and takes it over; with the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard.
17. She girds her loins with strength, and strengthens her arms.

Middle Years: vs. 18-22

18. She perceives that her trading is good; her lamp does not go out by night.
19. She lays her hands to the spindle, and her palms hold the distaff.
20. She stretches out her palms to the poor; yes, she reaches forth her hands to the needy.
21. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her

household are clothed with double-dipped scarlet.

22. She makes herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.

Later Years: vs. 23-28

23. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.
24. She makes fine linen and sells it, and delivers belts unto the merchant.
25. Strength and honor are her clothing, and she smiles at the future.
26. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and kindness controls her tongue.
27. She watches the goings of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Conclusion: vs. 30-31

28. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:
29. "Many daughters have done virtuously, but you excel them all."
30. Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD shall be praised.
31. Give her the fruit of her hands, and her own works will praise her in the gates.

What is virtue? The Proverbs 31 woman developed expertise at making garments, beginning in the early years (vs. 13), all five verses of the middle years, and then in verse 24 her specialty became marketable. Does virtue mean women should make their own clothes or do things from scratch? No, virtue means cultivating a skill(s) that will benefit our families and people in need, because it has value to them. The emphasis of Proverbs 31 is not on busyness but on usefulness.

Ruth is the only Bible woman called virtuous (Ruth 3:11). What was she good at? Care-taking. This skill not only profited Naomi and the family line, but also the Bethlehem community. Eventually, through King David and Messiah, Ruth's devotion rippled to the entire world. All because she helped her mother-in-law.

Is Proverbs 31 practical and attainable? Yes, but not by trying to be all or by doing everything at once. As time increases the value of a rare jewel, so a woman becomes virtuous with age and experience by fellowshiping with God while being home-centered, help-centered, and humanity-centered.

Over the years she pursues skills that can be personally fulfilling, but also have value to those around her. A woman of virtue has God-pleasing answers to the questions: What are you good at? And how does it benefit others?

Instead of feeling guilt for not measuring up, this balanced view helps us women, whether married or single, become virtuous through a lifetime of fearing the Lord, focusing on others, and developing useful skills.