

# chapter 4

Demystifying the

# Proverbs 31 Woman



## Chapter 4

### CLOSE READING OF Proverbs 31:20-31

**Opening Prayer:** Lord God, heavenly Father, by Your grace You have written our names in Your Book of Life. Grant that we may live in love and faithfulness to You and toward our neighbor, that we may at last enter Your promised rest and there obtain our eternal reward; for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### Key Term for This Chapter

**Coda:** Final summary section in a poem, musical piece, or other type of writing. It sums up the preceding section(s) and reminds the reader of the main themes.

**Eschatological:** Eschatology is the study of the end times.

**Oz:** Hebrew word for strength, encompassing both physical and personal strength. It is bestowed by God on His people and is an essential attribute of God (that is, something that makes Him who He is). By His strength, power, and might, Yahweh leads, guides, protects, and defends His people. He grants the strength to His people as a gift such that they trust in Him to deliver them from all that threatens them. This word is used several times in the poem to describe the woman.

### Introduction

In chapter 3, we discussed the structure of the poem and the fulcrum, the two verses forming the center of the poem on which the poem pivots. Verses 19-20 inform how we understand the chiasm created between verses 10-18 and 21-29. Emphasis is placed on the woman's practical skills and strong character as these central verses focus both on her activity regarding physical labor and her generosity to the poor. The final section of the poem is verses 21-29. They complete the chiasm found in verses 10-29. Again, the

seven characteristics of the woman as detailed in chapter 3 are reiterated in these verses, all tying into the woman's strong moral character as evidenced by her activity on behalf of her family and society. This section will continue to unfold her character. Finally, we'll see how the concluding verses (30-31) form a coda to the whole poem, again reiterating her worth based on the description of her found in the previous verses.

### **Verse-by-Verse Analysis of Verses 21-29**

21. She is not afraid of snow for her household,  
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.

The woman clothes her family in the finest items she can. Scarlet was considered a luxurious color. As David laments the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, he exclaims, "You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel" (2 Samuel 1:24). This verse points to the way scarlet was viewed. It was an expensive dye, often paired with heavy wool clothing used in colder weather. Steinmann points out that the scarlet clothing demonstrates the woman's ability to provide for her family. From a practical standpoint, she need not fear the snow because she has prepared well for it. Also, in a more general way, the woman does not fear the dangers of this world, like cold temperatures, precisely because she fears Yahweh (trusts in Him) above all things. Steinmann connects her lack of fear with **1 John 4:18**.

22. She makes bed coverings for herself;  
her clothing is fine linen and purple.

The woman's provision for her household extends to even bed coverings to further protect them from the cold and provide for their comfort. Interestingly, this same idea of bed coverings is used in Proverbs 7:16. There, the adulteress (another way of understanding the woman who is the opposite of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs) entices the young man in part by saying: **Proverbs 7:10-16**. In contrast to the adulteress, who spreads her couches

with bed coverings in order to draw young men into sin, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 works with her hands to create the coverings that will shelter and warm her family, perhaps, in a sense, directly combating the work of the adulteress.

In fact, Steinmann links these bedspreads to her husband and the enjoyment of the sexual union between a husband and wife which is given by God. The wife and husband here enjoy what is meant to be and ordained by God in direct contrast to the false pleasure the adulteress offers earlier in Proverbs. This union between man and wife is celebrated extensively in Song of Songs. For example, it opens with excitement of the bride: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine; your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers” (Song of Songs 1:2-4a). Later, the husband (the king), describes his bride’s body as a garden, and she responds: “Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits” (Song of Songs 4:16). The marriage bed is a beautiful gift, and the woman cares for and cultivates it by providing fine linens for the bed itself, tending to her marriage with an eye to detail and taking pleasure in it.

### **Marriage Praised/ Upheld in the Scriptures**

Marriage is a good and beautiful gift of God including the sexual union between spouses. Often we shy away from referring to this or speaking about it, but the truth is that it is a beautiful and awesome gift that leads to wonderful things (intimacy and children). Other places where Scripture upholds marriage and the sexual union between man and wife.

Song of Songs 7 (the entire book concerns the beauty of marriage)

**Matthew 19:4-6, John 2:1-11, Hebrews 13:4**

**DISCUSSION QUESTION 1:** How does the poem uphold the beauty of marriage in verse 22? How does the poem indicate that the woman tends to her marriage, and what is she at the same time combating?

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**DISCUSSION QUESTION 2:** Do you think that the beauty and gift of intimacy is communicated well in the church today? What are ways we could better uphold the truth about marriage and sexual intimacy—its beauty and its place in God’s design?

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The woman not only clothes her bed in luxurious garments, but she also clothes herself as a bride. In fact, the luxurious linen material she uses to clothe herself is later spoken of as the clothing of baptized followers of Jesus and of His Bride, the Church. In **Revelation 3:4-5 & 18**, followers of Christ are said to be clothed in pure linen, white and clean. Also in **Revelation 19:7-8**. Indeed, the woman clothes herself not only in the finest of clothes, but also in the finest deeds. The poem about the woman details the righteous deeds with which she clothes herself.

## Excursus: Clothed in Christ

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;  
my soul shall exult in my God,  
for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation;  
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Isaiah 61:10)

The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 clothes herself in the finest of materials. This is a sign of her hard work and careful stewardship of resources, and it also stands in as a way of thinking about her righteous deeds. But in reality, as a woman who fears the Lord, she is clothed with the salvation and righteousness given by Yahweh. She is one who has been given God's grace and righteousness. It can be tempting to look at this poem and see riches, wealth, and hardworking determination that we cannot possibly hope to match but must strive to match nonetheless. However, when we consider that all that the woman is and does in the context of God's grace and mercy, her life becomes less example to be copied and more reminder of who we are.

As baptized children of God, we can rejoice that we have been clothed in the finest linen, pure and white. We have been given the robe of righteousness through Christ because we have put on Christ. Paul writes in **Galatians 3:25-29**. To put on Christ is to have our identity take shape in Him. In Christ, the Law can no longer hold us captive with its accusations and death sentence (because, after all, apart from Christ we could not keep the Law and thereby become righteous before God). Our identity is that of forgiven, saved, righteous sons and daughters of God.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION 3:** How does the poem about the woman reveal who we are in Christ? What does it reveal about her and us?

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23. Her husband is known in the gates  
when he sits among the elders of the land.

The gates of the city were generally brimming with activity. There, the elders of that city sat to discuss important matters, making judgments concerning disputes, and more. The members of the city lived within the city walls, but their fields were outside of the city, so they traveled in and out to tend their fields. Also, any traders or other visitors would come through the city gates. For these reasons, it was the easiest and most logical place for people to meet and interact. We see this displayed quite clearly in chapter 4 of the Book of Ruth. When Boaz wishes to make arrangements to redeem Naomi's field on her behalf, as well as marry Ruth in order to father an heir for Mahlon, he sits down the gates to wait for the nearer redeemer (the relative with the first right to the land) to come in from his fields. Here he will be sure to meet the man and be able to make transaction with the witness of the elders and many of the citizens of his city.

To be known in the gates was an honor. **Proverbs 11:16** The woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is a gracious woman. Through her activity and careful provision for her family, she assists her husband in earning honor in the gates and sitting among the elders. This means he is likely recognized as one who also has wisdom. The garments she prepares would point to the family's wisdom and economy, and her ability to manage the household economy puts her husband in a good light. Steinmann notes again how this is a testament to the blessings of a loving marriage. Their loving service to each other benefits both of them.

24. She makes linen garments and sells them;  
she delivers sashes to the merchant.

Again, the woman is wise to deal in things that have high value. She makes “linen garments”. These were the attire of the wealthy. They are mentioned, for instance, in **Judges 14:12-13**. Samson wagers with the inhabitants of the town in which he is to marry his wife. He tells them a riddle.

Rather than impoverish her family, the woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 is able to provide amply for her family by producing linen garments and sashes and then selling them to merchants to be sold on the market. This verse furthers again the woman’s expertise in handicrafts and her ability to add to the household economy.

25. Strength and dignity are her clothing,  
and she laughs at the time to come.

Here again, the Hebrew word for “strength” is *oz* as in verse 17, where the woman was said to dress herself with strength and make her arms strong. This, again, is not the same word as in 31:10 (there it is *chayil*), but it conveys the two ideas of physical and moral strength. In the course of the poem, we have seen that the woman possesses both. The use of this word also ties the two parts of the chiasm closely together through not only thematic points of contact but also important words that recur.

According to Brown, Driver, Briggs, the word can also mean “might” and has many uses, including understanding this strength as something “bestowed by” Yahweh, as well as an essential attribute of Yahweh that is often praised. This strength is both physical and personal. It is Yahweh who is strong, and Yahweh who is the strength of those He calls His own:

- **Psalm 89:10** (Yahweh’s “mighty arm” is often used as a phrase describing His strength. It is used with the verb we see here).
- **Job 12:16**
- **Psalm 63:2** Power here [Hebrew *oz*, “ “strength” or “might”] (*Oz* is a personal attribute of Yahweh)
- **Psalm 93:1**



Oz as gift of Yahweh bestowed on His people:

- **Psalm 28:7-8**
- **Psalm 29:11**
- **Psalm 68:35**

The use of the verb in several places puts emphasis on these connections between the woman and the attributes of Yahweh, as well as the woman and the people of Yahweh. As we will see later, there are several interpretations of just who this woman is. Her ties to this verb will be helpful in seeing how she connects to some of those interpretations.

Practically speaking, the woman has shown this strength in her industriousness and preparedness, as well as in her personal moral character. As she clothes her house in scarlet, provides the richest of fabrics for them, and adds to the household economy, she ensures that her family is well provided for and that she can “laugh at the time to come”.

Ultimately, the woman can laugh at the time to come precisely because she has the strength of Yahweh. All her efforts may yet fail, as life is unpredictable. Yet she can sing with the Israelites who crossed the Red Sea: **Exodus 15:2.** Yahweh has gifted this same strength to the woman such that she can face the things that threaten her and her family with joyful confidence in the one whose strength is hers because she fears Him.

**Discussion Question 4:** In verse 25, the Hebrew word *oz*, meaning strength, is used to describe the woman. How is this strength connected to Yahweh? When is a time in your life when, despite your best preparations, you have faced something for which your own strength has failed you? How has Yahweh’s strength sustained you?

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26. She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

Just as those who instruct their children in Proverbs 1-9, the woman teaches her children the things of wisdom. She teaches them what is practical, of course, but this verse with its second half focuses more on the wisdom that comes from Yahweh, which clings to His promises and trusts in Him. The woman, then, proclaims Yahweh's grace and favor to her children. She teaches them His ways and His truths. As wisdom is ultimately Christ Incarnate, the woman is proclaiming Christ to her children when she "opens her mouth with wisdom".

The second half of this verse is sadly somewhat poorly translated in the ESV. As Steinmann renders it (and I would agree when looking at the original Hebrew), the verse is better translated as "the teaching of mercy/faithfulness is on her tongue". The word the ESV translates as "kindness" is the Hebrew word *chesed*. *Chesed* can be translated as "kindness", but this obscures its more proper meaning and close connection to Yahweh's covenantal promises. The word *chesed* is used of God to mean His grace/forgiveness/favor. It means He is faithful to His promises to His people and denotes His graceful attitude "toward humans who cannot by their own merits expect his mercy or kindness". *Chesed* is a gift from God's wisdom, and Wisdom instructs: "Let not steadfast love and faithfulness [*chesed*] forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart" (Proverbs 3:3). Proverbs 16:6 further asserts: "By steadfast love and faithfulness [*chesed*] iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil." The faithfulness and mercy of Yahweh atones for all of our sins and turns us to live a life of mercy toward other. *Chesed* is an above-and-beyond kind of love and mercy. It gives more than we as sinful human beings would expect. It offers love, faithfulness, and mercy where it is undeserved.

The woman speaks this mercy of Yahweh to her children and to those around her. As a believer, she is gifted with *chesed* to share with others. It is a fruit of faith, as Steinmann says, a "gracious disposition." The woman not only speaks this mercy, but her actions also show a pattern of mercy (as in vv. 19-20). As

believers, we, too, are gifted the *chesed* of Yahweh, which forgives our sins, serves our neighbors through us, and patterns our lives after His mercy.

27. She looks well to the ways of her household  
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

The woman organizes household tasks and workers, including the servants and likely her children. This type of household organization would have been fairly typical of the time and her station in life. Bernhard Lang touches on the wife's role as an overseer of the household servants and tasks in his comparison between the Proverbs 31 woman and the instructions for a wife laid out in a contemporaneous Greek poem, *Oeconomicus*. In the Greek poem, the wife is told to supervise her household servants (slaves in this case) with regard both to cooking the food she procures and in the tasks of weaving and garment production. To run a household well is to make sure that everyone is at his or her most productive, which adds to the household economy.

The theme of the woman's industriousness and aversion to idleness is also reiterated here. Idleness is often spoken against in Scripture. **Proverbs 19:15**. The woman's industriousness again secures all that her family needs. both her maidens and her care for them are mentioned in verse 15 of the poem, as well as her resistance to slothfulness, further connection the two halves of the *chiasm*.

28. Her children rise up and call her blessed;  
her husband also, and he praises her:

The children of the woman show her respect and deference. The fact that they "arise", or stand up, shows how much they honor her. Her teaching, care, and especially the proclamation of Yahweh's mercy for her children has led to this action. Song of Songs includes similar praise for the bride: "The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her" (6:9b).

The verb used to say that they "bless" her is also used in Proverbs 3:13, where Steinmann notes that it is "applied only to people who are blessed by grace through faith and Wisdom." Proverbs 3:13 reads: "Blessed is the one

who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding.” Truly, when this is the definition of blessedness, the woman is blessed. Her wisdom and understanding extend from the care of her household and family to the very truths of God’s grace and mercy. She receives praise from her whole family, her husband included, whose words are recorded in the following verse. The greatest praise of all will be given to her and to all believers on the Last Day, when Yahweh will declare to His beloved children for the sake of Christ: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

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

The husband’s words are recorded in this verse, one of the few times he is mentioned. This highlights his words as even more noteworthy and important. He uses the same word as is used of the woman at the beginning of the poem—*chayil*, or “strong character/strength.” We might say it this way: “Many women have strong character, but you surpass them all.” The husband sees his wife’s care, commitment, and love for her family as beyond anything any other woman does. This is also similar to the first half of **Song of Songs 6:9**. Both of these women are exceptional and above all other women.

This final verse of the *chiasm* formed by verses 10-18 and 21-29 ends with bang. The woman’s whole family honors, blesses, and praises her. From the lists of her attributes and activities, it would seem she is praised precisely because she herself is so wonderful. While there is an element of honor for her direct activity, the final coda in verses 30-31 redirects us to the true reason she is praised.

**Discussion Question 5:** What are some of the woman’s qualities in this section of the poem that mirror Yahweh’s qualities? What are some characteristics that mirror characteristics of the Church?

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## The Final Coda: Verses 30-31

30. Charm is deceitful, beauty is vain,  
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

The warning here against charm and beauty echoes earlier discussions in Proverbs concerning Dame Folly/the adulterous woman. The Proverbs 31:10-31 woman stands in direct contrast to the adulterous woman described at the beginning of the book. The charms and beauties of that adulterous woman are to be avoided because they are as nothing. The word used here as “vain” is more literally “fleeting vapor”. It is also used by Solomon in Ecclesiastes, where it is traditionally translated as “vanity”. A warning in **Proverbs 6:23-25**. The word used for “beauty” in verse 25 is the same word used in Proverbs 31:30 to describe the beauty that is a “fleeting vapor”.

Similarly, any beauty in a woman without the wisdom of Yahweh is without worth. Such a woman is described with the same adjective in **Proverbs 11:22**. Outward beauty apart from faith and wisdom is not what is to be desired in a godly wife. A godly wife may possess outward beauty, and this, too, is a gift. However, beauty alone is of no worth and is often used by the ungodly to entice and lead astray. Beauty becomes a problem when it is desired over and against godliness.

The second half of the verse points out the most important quality of a wife, why the woman is to be praised and why her family honors and blesses her: she is a woman who fears Yahweh. The primary concern for a marriage is faith. As Steinmann points out, godly wisdom should be the main attraction. There is no greater reason for praise and no more beautiful adornment for a woman and a wife. The woman has faith in Yahweh, and to have faith in Yahweh is to have faith in Jesus Christ. As a result of her faith, she does good works. Steinmann notes that the woman “demonstrates her God-given faith and skillful industriousness by furnishing her house and nourishing everyone in her household.” In this, she once again reflects Yahweh’s own work— “He

has furnished the entire creation by divine Wisdom and provides the food of eternal life in His Son.”

### **A Few Beautiful Women from the Bible**

- Sarah is described as being very beautiful, but often this leads to trouble for her and Abraham, as when she is not once, but twice, taken to be the concubine of a foreign king (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18) Despite their faults, both, Abraham and Sarah are considered righteous. As one who is declared righteous, Sarah’s beauty is the adornment of a godly woman.
- Rachel was considered beautiful, much more so than her sister Leah. Jacob fell instantly in love with her due to her beauty and was tricked by her father, Laban. Jacob’s intense love for Rachel and the fact that he did not love Leah caused much jealousy and strife.
- The bride in Song of Songs is praised as beautiful throughout the book. Her beauty is seen as an adornment, and she is worthy of praise by all who meet her. She is certainly not just outwardly beautiful, but also inwardly so. Her beauty is not seen as a liability but as a joyful gift shared with her bridegroom.

31. Give her of the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the gates.

This verse asserts that the woman should “benefit from her own productiveness.” It acknowledges her accomplishments and the reality of their contribution to the household. She manages all things well: time, resources, craftsmanship, negotiations, household servants, and so on. This can lead only to the betterment of her family.

That the woman’s works will praise her in the gates places emphasis on her honor throughout her city or town. Praise at the city gates was the highest kind of praise. It was public to the elders, wise men, and leaders of the city. Another woman we see praised at the gates is Ruth, which we’ll look at more closely in chapter 8. Earlier in this poem, the woman’s work led to her

husband being honored in the gates. Steinmann notes that “this reciprocity and mutuality of grace and praise demonstrates the ideal to which God calls all married couples.” Steinmann cites **Ephesians 5:21-33** and **1 Peter 3:1-7** as examples of the picture of marriage. In marriage, we are called to give all of the self in sacrificial service and love to others. We do so without the expectations or even the possibility of human reward. The husband and wife in Proverbs 31:10-31 model this type of sacrificial self-giving as they give each other this praise and honor through their sacrificial love.

As with much of the rest of the poem, though, this verse also has eschatological implications. First, the self-sacrificial love that leads to both the husband and the wife prospering and being honored in the gates is a picture of the sacrificial love of Jesus, the Bridegroom. He has sacrificed Himself for the Church, His Bride.

Second, the idea of the woman’s works praising her also echoes eschatological promises about all believers in Christ. For them, too, their good works will praise them: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’” (Rev. 14:13). Believers are commended by Christ for their good deeds even though everything was accomplished by His grace. These good deeds do not earn our salvation, rather salvation is based on the fact that our names are written by grace alone in the Book of Life.

## **Conclusion**

The second half of the larger *chiasm* again highlights the woman’s seven characteristics. The picture of her diligence and faithfulness is competed in verses 21-29. Again, these verses also reveal similarities the woman has with other parts of Scripture, but also with Yahweh, such as the characteristic of *oz* (strength).

Finally, the poem concludes with verses 30-31, drawing together all that has come before. Similarly to verses 19-20, which formed the *fulcrum* of the *chiasm*, the final two verses once again highlight a combination of the woman's faithfulness and her more concrete activities. As is pointed out by Murray H. Lichtenstein, both of these attributes are "accounted fit subjects or objects of praise." The final two verses, then, emphasize faith and that which follows faith, namely, good works. Structurally, it ends the poem on a high note—both of praise to the woman and of the future hope of all believers: life, salvation, grace, and mercy in Jesus' name, as well as honor, praise, and reward for the good deeds done in His name.

**Discussion Question 6:** How does the final coda (vv.30-31) both offer a summary of the overall poem and end it on a high note?

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### **Grace Alone and the Book of Life**

Lutherans believe in grace alone. This means that we do not merit our salvation by any of our works, no matter how "good" they may appear to us. Rather, salvation is a free gift of God's grace for the sake of Jesus Christ and because of His death and resurrection for us. Good works follow faith, but they never earn salvation and are good only because they are done in and through us by Christ Himself. Those who are saved by God's grace alone have their names written in His Book of Life by His own doing, not by their own doing. The idea of the "Book of Life" is a way of picturing the truth that the Lord knows each of His children by name, and that He has already declared them righteous. Supporting texts include the following:

- **Exodus 32:32, Psalm 139:16, Philippians 4:3, Revelation 3:5**
- **Revelation 13:8, Revelation 20:12-15, Revelation 21:27**