

4. The heart of a happy society

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads now for a moment of further prayer. Dear God, our Father, our hearts naturally are dull and our ears naturally deaf to your word.

And we pray therefore that you will wake us up and give us joy as we read these things that you have caused to be written in your book. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well friends, do let's turn to this passage again, Proverbs 31 and it's page 552 if you have our big church Bible. Many Christian people have puzzled over the question why the book of Proverbs should end as it does with this description of the godly wife who fears the Lord.

It happens to be a question that I've been pondering myself for quite a long time and I want to start off by suggesting an answer to it. I'm not certain that I'm right about this but let me at least give you something to think over and to chew over.

The book of Proverbs, as you know, is cast in the form of instruction given by a father to his young son. So for example, chapter 1 verse 8 says, Hear my son, your father's instruction.

[1 : 45] Chapter 3 begins, My son, do not forget my teaching. And there are many verses of that kind in the early chapters of the book. So although Proverbs has a great deal to say to older people as well, primarily it is for the young.

It's a training manual for young people in how to live in the fear of the Lord. So the book of Proverbs presupposes that fathers and mothers are in the business of training their growing children in how to live a wise and happy and godly life.

The book of Proverbs presupposes a society of godly people where parents are serious about instructing their children in the skills of life. So as you work your way through this book of Proverbs, it's almost as though you are overhearing a conversation with the father saying to his young son, My son, let me teach you about how to live.

Let me teach you about how to handle your neighbours, how to handle your money, how to avoid bad company, how to avoid sexual temptation. How to care for poor people in society, etc., etc. There are many, many subjects covered as the father patiently and quite often humorously gives his young son guidance in how to live a godly life. Now, the book of Proverbs does not all come from one pen, the pen of Solomon.

[3 : 08] Much of it is directly ascribed to Solomon, but parts of it are the sayings of other wise people. There's Agur, the son of Jacke, who wrote chapter 30, which we were looking at a week or two ago.

And in the early part of chapter 31, we have the words of Lemuel or Lemuel's mother. And there are other people who contributed to Proverbs who aren't even named. And this final section, verses 10 to 31, is anonymous.

The Bible experts, the Bible commentators, none of them has a clue who wrote it. So clearly, there was an editor of this book. There was some person who gathered together the various chapters and sections and finally published them in the form that we have here in our Old Testament.

And this anonymous editor, guided, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, decided to put this section on the excellent godly wife at the very end.

Now, my question is, why might that have been? Might he have been saying to his own son, might the editor have been saying to his own son, my son, in the previous 30 chapters of this book, I've gathered together for you many wonderful sayings of God's wise men, mostly from Solomon, but also from other people.

[4 : 23] In these 30 chapters, my boy, you have comprehensive instruction in how to live a godly life, a life lived in the fear of the Lord, a life that will make a wholesome and positive contribution to society.

But at the very end of this book of instruction, I want to show you one of the most important secrets of all for a young man who wants to live a life that is blessed by the Lord.

And that is, my son, find the right wife. Look at the very first sentence there in verse 10. An excellent wife, who can find?

Now that little question shows us that this passage is primarily addressed to the young man who is approaching the age when young men begin to think about marriage. It's a passage about finding a wife.

Now if the passage were addressed to the girls, primarily, it might begin, who can become an excellent wife? Or, who wants to be an excellent wife? Now of course this is a passage for the girls and the women to study as well.

[5 : 29] But I think it's worth noticing that its purpose, just like the purpose of the whole book of Proverbs, is to instruct the young men. And this editor of the book of Proverbs, who might possibly have been the author of verses 10 to 31, he is saying to his son, Son, this is the kind of woman to marry.

If you can persuade a woman like this to be your wife, then you will have something far more valuable, as verse 10 puts it, than jewels. In fact, my son, you could have the combined wealth of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett put together.

But if you have a wife like this, your life is far more deeply and truly blessed. Now that question of verse 10 is not a despairing question.

It's not saying that a wife of this kind is so vanishingly rare as to be unfindable. Not at all. It's a provocative question. It's simply saying that a wife of this kind is worth finding.

And the author says, such women are around. They are not as rare as needles in haystacks. I dare say there are quite a few of them sitting in this building this very evening. Now our writer knows what very young men are like.

[6 : 42] He knows that very young men, including no doubt his own son, are likely to ask this kind of question about a young woman. Is she pretty? Has she got nice hair and a sweet face and a pretty figure?

Is she kissable? Is she huggable? And the father says to his son, son, listen to me, watch my lips. Come with me now to the real world. The woman that you marry in 30 years' time will look like her mother.

Look at my verse 30 here, son. Charm, charm, that is to say, pretty words, flickering eyelashes, and an elegant way of walking down Buchanan Street. Charm is deceitful, my boys, so don't be deceived by it.

And beauty, again in verse 30, beauty, whether it's natural beauty or beauty that is enhanced by all those bottles that fill the bathroom, beauty is vain, empty, weightless, meaningless.

Now friends, just think of those three words. Beauty is vain. What do those three words say to the multi-billion pound cosmetics industry? If you are young and beautiful, and many of you are not, if you are young and beautiful, I include myself in that naturally.

[8 : 07] All of us need to think very carefully about those three words, don't we? Beauty is vain. Now, it's not that I think that the author would want his wife or his future daughter-in-law to walk down Buchanan Street looking like an old frump dressed as it were in sackcloth and ashes.

In fact, the Song of Songs tells us that there is a place in married love for myrrh and frankincense, for cinnamon and saffron, for nard and calamus, whatever they are, but it's perfumes and that kind of thing.

Yes, there's a place. But our verse 30 is teaching the young man to distinguish between what is important and lasting and what is fleeting and insubstantial.

And this young man is being told in no uncertain terms that physical beauty is not important. Now, this is so different from the way of the world, isn't it? And it's so refreshing and liberating for both men and women to read this.

Statistically, we have in this passage 22 verses of scripture about the excellent wife. And of those 22 verses, only half of one verse is concerned with a woman's physical beauty and that half verse is designed to show how very unimportant and potentially deceitful it all is.

[9 : 23] Young men, therefore, it is time for you to rearrange your thinking and to start valuing what is really valuable. And that's what we'll turn to now. So let's put our noses into the text and let's see what the Lord teaches us about the excellent and godly wife.

Let's notice four things about her. The first is she is a blessing to her husband. Let me read verses 11 and 12 again. 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. Now those are two very short verses but they say a great deal about the attitudes on both sides of a marriage, the attitudes that undergird a good marriage.

Look first at the husband's attitude to his wife. His heart, not his head, but his heart, the very centre of his life and personality, trusts in her.

Now how does this trust come about? The trust comes about because he respects her very deeply. He has seen her qualities at work over the years.

[10:31] He trusts her because she is unswervingly loyal and faithful to him but also because she has abilities. He trusts her to care for the children and to manage the household efficiently.

And more than that, she greatly helps the household cash flow through the work that she does on top of the housekeeping. That's what the second half of verse 11 is all about. He will have no lack of gain.

So his attitude to her is one of trust. But verse 12 shows us her fundamental attitude to him and that is that lifelong, the phrase is all the days of her life, all the days of her life, that means that when she and her husband are creaky and old as well as when they're young and strong, all the days of her life she does him good and not harm.

Now just think of that, married men. If you're a married man, if your wife is determined to do you good, what she's doing is fulfilling the role that was given to her back in Genesis chapter 2 when the Lord made her to be a helper to her husband.

She's come to understand the team nature of marriage, that a husband and wife are not simply two individuals who share a home and a bed, they are there for each other's good.

[11:49] He trusts her because of her integrity and fidelity and ability and she is committed to his well-being. Now it's that that lies behind verse 23.

Look at verse 23. Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. That verse appears to be about the husband but it's really about the wife.

The point of verse 23 is that the husband is able to be a respected elder in the public life of the city because his wife provides the strong domestic setting in which she is able to flourish.

You see, there's a natural weakness in men which is counted, shored up by the strength of a loving and faithful wife. Isn't that true, brothers?

A natural weakness in men. Why did the Lord look at Adam in the Garden of Eden and say it is not good for this man to be alone? Not because he was lonely but because he was incompetent.

[12:54] That's the reason, surely. He needed a wife so that everything could start happening. You see, if she hadn't been there he would have been scratching around the garden with a hoe eating two lettuce leaves per day and wondering why he was feeling so thin and miserable.

This husband in verse 23 is an honoured elder in the city because he is supported by such a fine wife. That's the point verse 23 is making.

Now to go back to verses 11 and 12 somebody might be thinking here tonight this is a very outdated view of marriage, surely. Can't the wife be independent and do her own thing?

Does she have to be so concerned with the well-being of her husband? Can't the wimp stand up for himself? Well I think my reply to that criticism would be it may be an older view of marriage but it's a better view of marriage.

This husband and his wife are involved with each other right up to the neck even further. They've thrown in their lot with each other. As they serve the Lord together they're serving each other together.

[14:01] If on the other hand a husband and wife lead essentially independent lives aren't they in the end going to pull apart inhabiting different realms with different sets of friends different interests separate bank accounts and then finally separate bedrooms separate lives only talking to each other really about the nuts and bolts of life who's going to do the Tesco run on Saturday who's going to fill the car with petrol no conversation about anything significant or happy.

Secondly let's see how she is active and hard working. Now this characteristic shows up in almost every verse from verse 13 onwards.

Just look at some of these verbs of activity starting in verse 13 she seeks she works she brings she rises while it is still night provides considers buys puts opens her hands makes and so on.

And look at verse 31 let her works praise her she's a worker. Look at verse 27 she does not eat the bread of idleness. Now the book of Proverbs as I'm sure you know has a lot to say about the sluggard that's the lazy bones who has who has a peculiar form of back trouble the kind of back trouble that he suffers from prevents him from getting his back off his bed.

That's the trouble with the sluggard. But this woman is the absolute opposite of the sluggard she's up and at it. Verse 17 perhaps captures her attitude perfectly.

[15:47] Look at verse 17 she dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. And that phrase she dresses herself with strength literally means she girds her loins and the best equivalent in our language would be she rolls up her sleeves.

It's not that she never sits down to have a cup of tea and a slice of millionaire shortcake to boost morale or perhaps even a good old piece of good old fashioned piece of Scottish tablet. She certainly needs her breaks during the day of course she does.

But when she's had her five minutes or her ten minutes she stands up she looks at the Dyson vacuum cleaner and she says right Mr. Dyson you are going to spend the next half hour vigorously eradicating the dirty leavings of my grimy family.

I'm going to take you Mr. Dyson by the scruff of the neck and sally forth. And off she goes. Let me just add this that there is nothing inappropriate for the husband to use the Dyson.

Every marriage has its own peculiarities. In many homes I guess the majority the wife is the cook but some husbands are a dab hand at cookery and they're the chief cook.

[16:58] In many homes it's the husband who does the garden but there are some wives who have very green fingers and are excellent gardeners. There are some husbands who can't tell a cabbage plant from a rose bush.

So each marriage works out its own particular divisions of labour and there's plenty of room for variety but the point here is that the excellent wife is a hard worker.

But as we think of her hard working characteristic let's notice two further things about her. The first thing is that her work is not purely domestic. She's not simply what we would call a housewife.

This woman is a business woman as well. She seems to have something of a cottage industry going on here. She not only makes clothes she also makes the cloth from which she creates the clothes.

Look at verse 13. She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands. Flax is the plant from which linen is made and wool obviously well that's used in making all sorts of clothes from socks to kilts.

[18:01] Verses 18 and 19 show her working late into the evening making yarn and cloth because verse 18 she perceives that her merchandise is profitable.

Then look at verse 24. She makes linen garments and sells them. She delivers sashes to the merchant so she sells what she has made. She's helping the family economy and that is why as verse 22 tells us she's able to wear clothes of fine linen and purple.

Now purple clothes in the ancient world were expensive clothes and the reason for that was that it was very hard to get the purple dye. The only source of purple dye in those days was a shellfish called the Murex and getting the poor old Murex to deliver the goods to the cloth trader was a pretty costly business so any person who could afford purple clothes was at least fairly well off.

But this lady has other strings to her bow as well. Look back at verse 16. She considers a field and buys it with the fruit of her hands in other words with the money she's made by her own work she plants a vineyard.

So she's a farmer as well as a clothier. She considers a field. In other words she doesn't buy it too quickly she looks at it rather carefully. She asks is the soil fertile?

[19:23] Is it well drained? Does this field get enough sun to produce good grapes? She's not interested in buying any old grade C field it's got to be a good field a worthwhile investment for her hard earned money.

Now as you look at these various details here you realise that this particular woman has advantages that many women will never have. Verse 15 tells us that she has servant girls those are her maidens not her daughters but her servants and she has enough money to buy a field from time to time.

So she's the mistress of a fairly large establishment and she has money to invest. Many Christian women are never going to be in quite that position or to have quite that level of responsibility. But

the principle of hard work and making the most of what's available that is for all to learn from. But let's also notice something else about her and that is that in the midst of all this hard work she is relaxed and happy. There's something peaceful deep inside her despite the fact that she's on the go from dawn to dusk.

Look at verse 21. She's not afraid of snow for her household for all her household are clothed in scarlet. If you look down at the footnote there that could be and probably is in double thickness. [20 : 45] And the point is that because of her hard work and her forethought in making good quality clothes she knows that her husband and her children and her servants will be warm even in cold weather.

So she's not a fearful and anxious woman. She doesn't go around wringing her hands worried about adverse things that might or might not happen. A bit like the aunt that we met back in chapter 30 verse 25.

She's prepared for the future and it gives her a confidence that even in rough times she and her family will get through. Diligence in the present produces confidence for the future. And even more so look on to verse 25. Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come. Don't you love that? Even in the midst of the busyness of her life she's able to throw back her head and laugh.

And what does she laugh at? The time to come. The future. She doesn't lie awake at three o'clock in the morning biting her nails and worrying about her children and how they're going to cope with life or worrying about how she and her husband as they grow older are going to manage when he no longer has the strength to cut the firewood or draw up the bucket from the well.

[22 : 01] How does she manage to be so carefree? Well verse 30 helps us to understand she's a woman who fears the Lord. That's the secret of her life. That's the heartbeat of her life.

She surely knows that great command from early on in Proverbs. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your path straight.

He'll open up the right pathway before you. So she has come to understand that the way to be unafraid of the future is to trust the Lord. Jesus of course teaches us just the same lesson. Fear not little flock for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom so don't worry about your life. So she's an active hard working woman but she's learned also to relax and laugh and trust in the Lord.

Now thirdly we'll move a bit more quickly she cares for those who are in a weaker position than she is. She's obviously one of the stronger and more privileged members of society.

[23 : 08] She's financially well off her husband is one of the city elders so she's a bit of a queen bee but she's not self-absorbed. She really does care for those around her who don't have her privileges.

So look for example at verse 20 she opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy and that theme of her hands you'll see run through from verse 19.

We see her hands hard at work there spinning yarn making cloth for her clothing her cottage industry but those same hands that are working for profit in verse 19 are in verse 20 opened generously to help the poor and needy.

So she's willing to share the fruits of her own hard work with others who don't have the power to work hard or to make money people who may have fallen on hard times because they're disabled or handicapped in some way.

She notices people who are in a weaker position than she is and she has mercy on them and she cares for her husband her servants her household.

[24 : 14] Look at the way she cares for her household look at their clothes in verse 21 as we've noticed clothed in double thickness but also for their food look back at verse 15 she rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens now just think if you'd been a 15 year old girl looking to have employment in service I think you would have wanted a job in this household wouldn't you?

Look at verse 15 it's early in the morning master is still upstairs snoring the first blackbird hasn't even brushed its teeth and begun its morning aria and the mistress is downstairs already setting out the places setting out the porridge and the muesli and the maple syrup pancakes for all the household including the maids at the kitchen table I would have wanted to work for her and look on

to verse 27 she looks well to the ways of her household there's security there for the servants and kindness and love so this woman is not simply a go-getting business woman whose only concern is with profit yes she's economically shrewd but she's very much aware of the needs of those around her and she meets those needs and did you notice verse 26 she teaches her children and her servant girls she opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue the book of proverbs is about the teaching of mothers as well as the teaching of fathers and this woman doesn't only act with wisdom she passes it on by teaching it but verse 26 tells us she does it kindly she's just the opposite of the shrill sharp-tongued woman who shouts at everybody she's a kind teacher she's patient

I guess she takes the long view she knows that her little Angelica isn't going to be a mature and godly woman for at least another 20 years so she goes gently and then fourth the quality of her life draws forth the praise and appreciation of her children and her husband let me read again those two particularly delightful verses 28 and 29 her children rise up and call her blessed her husband also and he praises her he says many women have done excellently but you surpass them all don't you love that picture of the children rising up it's like a standing ovation isn't it they say mother you are blessed by God and you're a blessing to us for all these years you have worked tirelessly for us you've fed us you've clothed us you've taught us you've comforted us when we needed comfort you've smacked our bottoms when necessary but we probably needed it you've advised us and you've guided us you've denied yourself for our sake for all these years you have set us an example that we shall never forget verse 30 a woman who fears the Lord is the one to be praised we praise you mother because you have shown us what it means to fear the Lord and look at the husband's words in verse 29 many women have done excellently but you my sweetest surpass them oh I've just added that haven't I but you surpassed them all that's what he says now married men just look up and look at me for a moment if you're a married man do we get it is this going to sink into our hearts these things and lots more beside need to be said and not too infrequently and really verse 30 follows straight on from the husband's words in verse 29 when he was young and she was young of course she was charming and beautiful it was her charm and beauty that drew her to him and him to her but when the external beauty fades as it always will do then what is really valuable shines forth and calls forth our admiration and that is a woman who fears the Lord and look at verse 31 her praise is not only heard at home from her children and her husband she's praised in the city gates too the city elders come to her husband and say to him it must be a blessing to you brother to have a wife like that well let me close with a few reflections to try and get a little perspective on this this passage very evidently is a passage that praises and commends marriage but not only marriage also family life strong loving relationships between parents and their children and to return to where I started

I think it's put here at the very end of Proverbs to make the point that a happy stable and godly society will have faithful marriage and good family life right at its heart the editor of Proverbs is surely saying to his son son I'm finishing my instruction to you with some advice which will make all the difference to you all the difference between whether you lead a godly life in the end or not make sure you marry the right woman study these verses my son and then you will know what she's like now the Bible does teach us of course that marriage is not for everybody Jesus teaches this very clearly in Matthew chapter 19 the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 explains that while marriage is a great gift of God to many people singleness is also a gift from God to some and as we know there have always been many godly Christians for whom marriage has been inappropriate or for some impossible and yet such men and women live fine fruitful

Christian lives it's not essential to be married Jesus during his earthly life was not married but he achieved everything that he was given to do and his life was a complete fulfillment of God's purpose now our passage here in Proverbs 31 teaches us that marriage is profoundly good and will always be at the heart of a godly society so let's allow this passage in 2011 to realign our values which I guess are slipping over the last 50 years or so in British society there's been a great draining of confidence in marriage isn't that true we have at least partly turned away from marriage almost as though we've been embarrassed by it divorce rates we know have rocketed and while society including non-Christian society has recognised that there's something deeply sad and wrong about so many marriages breaking down despite all that we haven't known how to put things right and strong forces within our society have sought to promote and market alternative arrangements cohabitation without marriage same-sex partnerships and what you might call serial monogamy where an individual might live successively with several other partners over the course of 40 or 50

years whether married to them or not it seems to me as well that quite a lot of Christian young adults in the last 30 years or so have become wary of marriage and even frightened of committing themselves to it they've seen the disarray that marriage is in in our society and they've thought to themselves do I dare

[32 : 06] I've known so many divorced couples including perhaps some in my own family have I the capacity to sustain a good marriage I think possibly our young men in the churches have particularly been infected by this fearfulness the girls in the churches very often have been waiting but nobody has stepped forth and invited them to Starbucks for a cup of coffee and a donut let me say this if you're a young or youngish man and not yet married unless marriage is impossible for you take out your Bible again later this evening as you sit over your night time cup of coffee and read this chapter again and believe it believe it friends it's the loving words of God to you look again at verse 10 the excellent wife is more precious than jewels and verse 11 the heart of her husband trusts in her and he will have no lack of gain these things are true God made

Adam and then he made Eve and then he gave the two of them to each other so Proverbs 31 is one of the Bible's great ringing endorsements of marriage let's allow its message therefore to sink into our ears and to teach us God's values let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear God our Father we thank you so much for the the man who wrote these things educating his son teaching the young boy what was really valuable we thank you for causing this man to write these things as he has done and to put them in the Bible for every generation subsequent to read it and we thank you indeed dear Father for the blessing and joy of Christian wives and mothers we have known so many of them and what a great blessing they are to us and we pray that you'll help us therefore to take this message to heart to love it and believe it to support and sustain and nourish marriage and all this we ask in the name of Jesus
Christ our Lord Amen