

more than rubies



Proverbs 31:10-31

MORE THAN RUBIES

Today, as it's Mother's Day, I'm going to take my life in my hands and look at what God has to say about the perfect woman (and already I'm in trouble!). Let's turn to:

Proverbs 31:10-31

This is a tricky one to teach on, for several reasons:

- It sounds like you've got to be some kind of real-life Wonder Woman to fit the bill! Take a look at websites like Proverbs31woman.com, and the message is "You too can be as perfect as the woman in Proverbs 31!"
- It also sounds like a woman's purpose in life should be to slavishly please her husband, like a 1950s suburban housewife. As we'll see, the woman in Proverbs 31 is definitely *not* a 1950s suburban housewife!
- The phrase "Who can find?" makes it sound like a perfect woman is a rarity. But you could also translate it, "Who is worthy to obtain?" The emphasis is not on a woman to live up to this, but on a man to *deserve* it.

What then is God saying? Well, this passage is an acrostic – each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from *aleph* to *tav*. So this is the A-Z of womanhood! Now that doesn't mean that every woman has to tick every box – every woman is different. Some will marry, some won't; some will have children, some won't; some will run businesses, some won't. What we have here is a tribute to womanhood *as a whole*.

Not only that, it's a challenge to certain misperceptions of womanhood that still exist, even in our own day, e.g.:

1) This Woman Is Strong. Throughout history men have often viewed women as the 'weaker sex.' However, this woman in Proverbs is quite different. She's referred to as *Ishah-Chayil*, a Woman of Greatness - military greatness. It's used at the end of the chapter as well: "Many women perform acts of strength (*chayil*), but you surpass them all" (vs29).

In fact, the whole passage is full of this stuff:

- Vs11: "Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value", as in spoil, booty, reward.
- Vs16: "She considers a wilderness and 'conquers' it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard."
- Vs17: "With vigour she girds up her loins (now that's fighting-talk!); she strengthens her arms for battle."

So, are women weaker? Physically maybe, but not by much (think childbirth!). In reality the sexes are strong in different ways, but both are as important as each other. I know I wouldn't be the man I am if it wasn't for Kellie standing by me, working with me, believing in me.

What would you be, without the women in your life?

2) This Woman Is Skilled. There will be some pastors today using this passage to argue that women should behave like they're stuck in a time-warp – but that's not what Proverbs 31 is saying. This woman is a wife, mother, fashion-designer, wine-merchant, charity-worker, community leader. She's a working mum, both inside and outside the home – and this would have been fairly common in the ancient near-east, where a family's survival depended on a woman's income as well as a man's, particularly in textiles (think spinning and weaving).

It's a well-known fact that women can multi-task a whole lot better than men, and this description is God's 'amen' to that. So translate this proverb to the 21st century and what would this woman look like? Stick your hands up if any of these sound familiar: child-minder, taxi-service, IT consultant, Michelin chef, amateur shrink, image-consultant, DIY expert, landscape gardener, personal assistant, volunteer accountant, part-time teacher, in-car navigator, general practitioner, church leader ...

And some people still insist women are incapable!

3) This Woman Is Savvy. In many parts of the ancient world, women were regarded as little more than sex-objects; child-bearers; beautiful air-heads. But here, womanhood is elevated to a whole other level:

- Vs26: "She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the Law of Kindness (*Torat-Chesed*) is on her tongue."
- Vs27: "She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness (or folly)."

- Vs30: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears *Yahveh* is to be praised."

And the fear of *Yahveh* is the beginning of ... wisdom (Proverbs 9:10)!

So – this woman is described as being so smart, it's almost as if she is God's mouthpiece, God's law-giver! Not only that, but at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs wisdom is personified, not as a man, but as a woman – and the same is true at the end. Jesus understood this: perhaps that's why He chose women like Mary Magdalene to follow Him, as well as men.

And in Mary's case, to be the first witness of the resurrection!

Male And Female

Now you know why this woman is described as being of greater value than a handful of rubies. But there's one other reason for placing such a high value on the women in our lives, and it's a humdinger! Just take a look at vs1.

Most of what we read in Proverbs is advice given by a father to his son, and Judaism has rightly seen it as God's advice to His kids. But in Proverbs 31, we're looking at advice given by a *mother* to her son. Is this a glimpse into the *mother*-heart of God?

Consider these examples:

- In Genesis 1:26-27, God creates human beings in His image to be His representatives, His divine image-bearers, here on earth. And what does He make them? He makes them male ... and female.
- In Job 38:29-30, God speaks of having a womb and giving birth to ice and snow. Now obviously this is poetic language, and we're not supposed to take it literally, but why does God speak of having a *womb*?
- In Isaiah 49:15-16, God compares Himself to an Israelite mother, weeping over her children taken into captivity. And as an act of remembrance, she carves her kid's names into the palms of her hands.

Now please understand: it's not that God is male or female – He transcends all that (though in the incarnation ...). But God has placed something of His characteristics in both male and female, and that is what makes us all great, potentially.

So, this Mother's Day, let us celebrate the women of greatness in our own lives, and show them how much they mean to us.

And to God.