

The Proverbs

Lesson 34

Proverbs 31

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 31:1 The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him.

The last chapter in the Book of Proverbs is probably the favorite of all passages in the Bible in reference to a saintly wife or mother. The NASB says, “the words of King Lemuel,” but the Hebrew says the “words to King Lemuel” taught to him by his mother. It is an oracle like that of the previous chapter, the only two such passages in the Book of Proverbs. An oracle is a Divine communication directly from the LORD.

The first verse mentions King Lemuel as the recipient of this Divine oracle from his mother. Who is Lemuel? Commentators of all the ages have widely speculated about the identity of Lemuel, but no one really knows!

This last chapter is extremely unusual in this book; it is the only instruction from a mother to a son. Chapters 1 through 29 constitute instruction from Solomon to his son and chapter 30 is an oracle directly to the king from the LORD. Here, a mother instructs her son about women.

THE MOTHER'S SON

Proverbs 31:2 What, O my son? And what, O son of my womb? And what, O son of my vows?

Translators have rendered the original in several ways and this example is from of the NASB. Strict Hebrew rendering causes more difficulties than clarity. It is complicated because Chaldean words are used in this verse but translated as if they were Hebrew. Chaldee is the language of a Semitic group that was absorbed into the Babylonian Empire. It is safe to accept it as a form of the Babylonian language. For instance, the word for “son” in this passage is Chaldean rather than Hebrew. Probably the best English translation belongs to the 1538 Myles Coverdale version that says, “My son, you son of my body, O my dear beloved son of my vows!” Coverdale renders the verse as a statement rather than three questions. The reference to “the son of my vows” indicates that she is a woman who has pledged her life to her husband and that she has been a true and faithful wife who has brought great honor to him. Her first comments to her son warn him against entertaining women who have taken no vows. This mother wants her son to know that he is special to her.

A WORD ABOUT WOMEN

Proverbs 31:3 Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings. ^{4a} It is not for kings, O Lemuel.

Because Lemuel is important to his mother, she instructs him not to give his strength to women. The language means that she warns about the downfall of having sexual relationships with multiple women. The mother concludes her message with a beautiful description of the woman she wants her son to marry. In her opinion, kings, such as her son, should find one wife who will enhance his presence in the kingdom as opposed to having relationships with multiple women from all over the kingdom and beyond.

A WORD ABOUT STRONG DRINK

Not For Kings

Proverbs 31:4b It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, ⁵ lest they drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

In addition to urging him to avoid sexual relationships with multiple women, the mother warns against drinking wine. Fermented beverages hamper and cloud the mental capacity of an individual. Here she warns that under the influence of wine, justice can be thwarted and the innocent hurt.

For the Dying

Proverbs 31:6 Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter. ⁷ Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his trouble no more.

Wines can act on the body the same as drugs and potions; they can be used on the sick and hurting for specific medical purposes, but should not be used for social and recreational reasons. In this verse, the reference to “poverty” is a reference to one’s physical health, not economic status.

A WORD ABOUT RIGHTS

Proverbs 31:8 Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all the unfortunate. ⁹ Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.

Wine must be avoided completely because it inhibits the judgment and work of the king. Why is this so important? She instructs her son that, as king, it is his responsibility to defend the lives and rights of those who cannot guard and protect themselves in his kingdom. It is interesting because the word “afflicted” actually means those on their last leg. The word “needy” means those who cannot defend themselves from those who make it their life’s work to oppress others.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EXCELLENT WIFE

Learn

Proverbs 31:10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.

The mother explains the importance of her son's finding an excellent wife. Other versions use the words virtuous or noble. All are correct. Such a wife is strong, full of energy and her character is above reproach. Her worth is so high that all the precious stones in the world combined cannot equal the value of such a wife. The first point of this section is important. It includes twenty-two verses and each addresses a specific point of importance in the qualities of an excellent wife. The Hebrew alphabet contains twenty-two characters. In this section, the mother starts each sentence with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet to stress the importance of each point. "Aleph" is the first letter and it means to teach or learn. In verse 10, the mother is telling her son to learn that an excellent wife is invaluable.

Home

Proverbs 31:11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

The second letter of the alphabet is "Beth" and it means house, home or household; however, here it is a reference to the people in that home rather than the physical building. In verse 11, the mother instructs her son that the heart of her husband finds his home in the excellent wife. In addition, everything he needs in a wife is within her; nothing is lacking. She will take care of the family and its safety can be assured under the watchful eye of this spotless wife.

Benefit

Proverbs 31:12 She does him good and not evil all the days of her life.

The third letter is "Gimel" and it means to benefit. The husband of an excellent wife will never be disappointed in her; in every way, she will always bring value and assistance to him.

Swinging Door

Proverbs 31:13 She looks for wool and flax, and works with her hands in delight.

The fourth letter is "Daleth" and represents the action of the wife as she goes in and out of the door of the house. The door swings out for her to search for materials and the door swings in to the home where she will use her hands to work with the materials she has acquired.

And Lo

Proverbs 31:14 She is like merchant ships; she brings her food from afar.

The fifth letter is "He" and it is used in the Hebrew to establish a new connection with what has just been said. Sometimes the Bible translates it with the word "lo" or "and lo." Here, verse 14

is connected to the previous verse. In verse 13, we find that the spotless wife will leave the house to purchase items that she will bring back to the home to create something to sell or trade on the open market. With the next phrase, “And lo,” she operates in the home like a merchant ship operates on the sea as she brings the needed goods to her family.

Hook

Proverbs 31:15 She rises also while it is still night, and gives food to her household, and portions to her maidens.

The sixth letter is “Waw” and it means hook or peg. Hooks and pegs are used to keep certain things in certain places so that everything is always in its rightful place. This wife knows her rightful place and that includes her duties to provide the meals for her family and servants. Just as the curtains in the Temple had to be hung properly on the pegs on its walls, so too, this wife knows that everyday food must be pegged to the tables for the feeding of the family at the proper time.

Abundance

Proverbs 31:16 She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard.

The seventh letter is the “Zayin” and it means abundance. This wife will buy a field, plant crops and the yield at the end of the season will be abundant! She has not used her husband’s money to buy this field; she has used her own funds that she has earned in her previous endeavors.

Stone Fence

Proverbs 31:17 She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.

The eighth letter is “Heth” and it stands for a stone fence. This wife is strong, as strong as a stone fence in all her work.

Twist Together

Proverbs 31:18 She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night.

The ninth letter is “Teth” and it means to twist together. She twists all her efforts together to assure that the product produces a good gain. Her days and nights are twisted together; if the work cannot be completed during the day, she will spend the night finishing the task.

Hold

Proverbs 31:19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle.

The tenth letter is “Yod” and it means to hold with the hand. She will take the distaff, the item that the wool or flax is rolled upon and she will use her hands to feed it in the spindle to twist it

into thread. She will hold one in the right hand and operate the other with the left. It is an example of her great skill.

Outstretched Hand

Proverbs 31:20 She extends her hand to the poor; and she stretches out her hands to the needy.

The eleventh letter is “Kaph” and it means outstretched hand. This wife will care for the needy with what she has to share. The LORD requires that a portion of everything that the LORD gives to a person be extended to help those with their most basic needs of food, water and clothing.

Scholar

Proverbs 31:21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet.

The twelfth letter is “Lamed” and it means scholar. This wife is well trained in the necessities of caring for her family. She is not a novice and she will not make a mistake in this area of life. This verse should say, “all her household are doubly clothed with scarlet.” In the winter her family will be warm because she knows enough to provide them a double layer of clothing.

Larger Body

Proverbs 31:22 She makes coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

The thirteenth letter is “Mem” and it means larger body such as an ocean over that of a lake. Here the word “coverings” should be translated “carpets” or “tapestries.” She has created large floor carpets for her guests and family to sit upon. In most houses, small carpets are used; one for each visitor. In her home, a large expensive carpet is provided for all. The expense of the carpet does not compare to the cost of the purple linen she uses to make her own clothing. The finest of linen could be successfully dyed purple; however, the purple dye was extremely expensive. The color came from the pinna magna, a large long armed squid found in the Mediterranean Sea. The squid is retrieved from the Great Sea and the ink is removed to dye the fine linen.

Propagate

Proverbs 31:23 Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.

The fourteenth letter is “Nun” and it means to propagate or increase. Because of his wife, he is respected and honored as a leader and judge at the city gates where almost all official business is transacted.

Support

Proverbs 31:24 She makes linen garments and sells *them*, and supplies belts to the tradesmen.

The fifteenth letter is “Samekh” and it means to support or bind up. The buyers will purchase her products and use them as linen belts to bind their waists and turbans to cover their heads.

Seen

Proverbs 31:25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future.

The sixteenth letter is “Ayin” and it means seen. All onlookers see her character but she also sees the possibilities of her future. Her character is more important than the clothing she wears.

Speech

Proverbs 31:26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

The seventeenth letter is “Pe” and it means speech or mouth. This wife has used her mouth to speak to the lives of her family and friends. Her words are full of wisdom and the principles that she teaches are full of kindness.

Righteous

Proverbs 31:27 She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.

The eighteenth letter is “Tsadhe” and it means righteous. This wife has made sure that her house is righteous. She has set the example personally and the family follows her example.

Time

Proverbs 31:28 Her children rise up and bless her; her husband *also*, and he praises her, *saying*:

The nineteenth letter is “Qoph” and it means time. Relationships take time. Everyone has a mother, but not every child calls its mother blessed. Every husband has a wife, but not every husband praises her. This wife has proven herself through time and earned the right to be called blessed by her children and be praised by her husband.

Head

Proverbs 31:29 "Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all."

The twentieth letter is “Resh” and it means head. This mother wants her son to find a wife who excels all the available women in the kingdom. She should have already proven that she excels them before she takes her place as the wife and becomes the caretaker of all that the son owns.

Favor

Proverbs 31:30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, *but* a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.

The twenty-first letter is “Shin” and it means favor. Here, the mother teaches her son that the outward appeal and appearance of a woman means nothing. Her public persona may be counter to her private personality in the home. Many have been deceived by such and disappointed to find the true hidden character of the new spouse after the marriage. The mother teaches her son that what matters is the inner person and how that person feels about the LORD. Does she worship the LORD? Is her soul in harmony with the LORD? Such a woman should be the king’s wife! Such a woman every girl should strive to become! Such a woman deserves the praise of her husband!

Covenant

Proverbs 31:31 Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

The last letter is “Tav” and it means covenant. The last words of the mother to her son set his responsibility as a husband who has obtained an excellent wife. He is to let her work and do what she has been trained and desires to do as a wife. He is not to take credit for her accomplishments; he is not to hamper her in her endeavors. A marriage is a personal covenant and because he is the head of the house, he is to give her what she needs to excel as a wife, mother, teacher, caregiver and a child of the LORD.