

Green Pastures week of May 6-12_Mother's Day

Monday, May 6

A week of Biblical Womanhood

Today's Scripture reading: Proverbs 31.1-31 (MSG)

READ & REFLECT

This is a longer reading/reflection – so buckle up. And ladies, you may want to gear up like a hockey goalie for this text will undoubtedly feel like the equivalent of thirty-one hockey pucks being slapped in your direction...fun fact: hockey pucks are designed to move at great speed across the ice and can reach velocities as high as 100mph; the average shot speed for experienced ice hockey players is typically between 80mph and 90mph. So, yeah, gear up. And no, this isn't fair. There is no male equivalent to Proverbs 31. The closest would be Paul's list of qualifications for church elders/overseers in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, but those hockey pucks are aimed at leaders, not males, so men can relax and watch those slapshots from the safety of the concession stand. No, not fair at all. So, ladies, gear up. And note going in that the one wielding the hockey stick is ultimately a woman...

The words of King Lemuel,
the strong advice his mother gave him:

Okay pause right there before we really get going; the KJV says this is the "prophecy" King Lemuel's mother taught him while the Message renders it "strong advice." The Hebrew is "massa" and means "heavy load or burden" though these days we're more likely to call this a "download." And btw we have no idea who King Lemuel is – Lemuel meaning "for God" and thus is probably an epithet put on an Israelite king such as Solomon – and if that's the case, these are the words of Bathsheba; oh, the plot thickens; ladies, Bathsheba is wielding a hockey stick, she's looking past her son at you and here come the pucks...)

Oh, son of mine, what can you be thinking of!
Child whom I bore! The son I dedicated to God!
Don't dilute your strength on fortune-hunting women,
promiscuous women who shipwreck leaders.
Leaders can't afford to make fools of themselves,
gulping wine and swilling beer,
Lest, hung over, they don't know right from wrong,
and the people who depend on them are hurt.
Use wine and beer only as sedatives,
to kill the pain and dull the ache
Of the terminally ill,
for whom life is a living death.
Speak up for the people who have no voice,
for the rights of all the misfits.
Speak out for justice!
Stand up for the poor and destitute!"

Another quick pause – note that (presumably) Bathsheba's first shots on goal are not at women as much as they are at the hockey pucks – I mean, politicians, generally men in her world – who hold office, both as to what to avoid (fortune-hunting women and swilling beer) and on what to focus (speaking up for the voiceless and seeking justice for the nobodies). And now, she takes aim...

A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve, and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended & ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colorful linens and silks.

Her husband is greatly respected when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them, brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.

Her clothes are well-made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly.
She keeps an eye on everyone in her household and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise:
"Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!"

Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.
Give her everything she deserves! Adorn her life with praises!

This is God's Word

Two things:

One, this is more descriptive portrait to be absorbed and then translated in culturally appropriate ways than a literal prescriptive list to be slavishly duplicated – and, good news, these aren't in fact hockey pucks at all, and they're not aimed at women.

Two, in what I'm dubbing "a week of biblical womanhood" as we approach Mother's Day, I'm not going to presume as a silver- and increasingly white-haired male to provide instruction on biblical womanhood. That would no doubt be even less palatable than me quoting a Franciscan monk. No, instead I will lean into the words of Rachel Held Evans from her book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* as I commend her and her book for your prayerful contemplation – and if you do, hopefully you take your prayerful contemplation with generous doses of humor because she offers plenty.

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:
What are your initial thoughts on the portrait of the "virtuous woman" of Proverbs 31?
How does this instruct you as a woman? What lessons does it hold for you as a man?

PRAY

Lord, let your words – particularly these words in Proverbs –
be more than slapshot hockey pucks to me;
Let them be your empowerment in and upon me
of whatever gender I may be
to become all that you are creating and shaping me to be right where I am.
Through your mercies.

Amen

Tuesday, May 7

Eshet chayil

Today's Scripture reading: Proverbs 31.10-31 (MSG)

READ

A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve, and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended & ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colorful linens and silks.
Her husband is greatly respected when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them, brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.
Her clothes are well-made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly.
She keeps an eye on everyone in her household and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise:
"Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!"
Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.
Give her everything she deserves!
Adorn her life with praises!

This is God's word.

REFLECT

I thought about dissecting this portrait, parceling out bits of it through the week, but that feels a bit like the violence done to the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 (no, really, let's not go there). So, no chopping and handing it out bit by bit. Just take in the whole portrait. Not the skewed caricature, mind you, but the whole portrait.

The fact is that its lines are not hockey pucks at all.
They're letters.

Twenty-two of them, to be exact. All twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Which is one of the reasons why we do well to keep them together. No doubt the compiler of this ancient collection of Semitic proverbs saw this as more than the complete portrait of a really good woman but as the whole portrait of "lady wisdom" who stands as the heroine making appearances throughout its pages – the feminine personification of divine wisdom that sees life through the wide-angle lens of reality and knows just what to do or not to do in the moment.

In this sense then, this portrait is for all of us, regardless of gender or marital status.

But on the more directly literal level of application to women – and to mothers for our purposes this week – it’s a portrait meant to empower rather than to punish (like a hockey puck), to unleash potential and personhood rather than to confine, box, and restrict.

I know, that may be a bit of a hard sell for some who really want a hockey puck.

But the truth is these are letters forming a portrait, not slapshot hockey pucks. And the first letter of the first line of this twenty-two-line portrait is the Hebrew letter *alef* which is the first letter of the phrase *eshet chayil* which the Message translates “good woman,” the King James “virtuous woman” and other translations “worthy woman.”

All those translations are fine as long as you see underlining each of them the concept of strength, dignity and personal power for that’s what’s at the heart of *chayil*.

There’s power behind it.

Power in it.

Power through it.

Strength. Efficiency. Wealth. Army. These are the frequently used English equivalents for *chayil*. From the standpoint of a patriarchal society, it’s a very masculine sounding word – masculine as in the “mighty men of David” – to whom the very same word is repeatedly applied as the narrative celebrates their “mighty deeds” like slaying hundreds in one battle or taking down a giant or two or killing a lion in a pit on a snowy day. Mighty deeds for mighty men.

And here – and in at least one other place in the Hebrew Scriptures (in and about Ruth, if you must know) – this very masculine-oriented word is directly applied to a woman. An *eshet chayil* – a “mighty woman” or a “woman of valor” or a “woman of mighty deeds,” a veritable one-woman army. At first glance, we’re tempted to see Mirabel’s physically powerful sister Luisa in *Encanto* – and perhaps that’s what the original readers were led to expect by the very use of the word.

But here there are no corpses stacked in piles, no giants slain, no leopards subdued in a pit on a snowy day. There aren’t even donkeys being hoisted up in each arm. No, here is something so, so, so...humble and unassuming and busy and energetic and *ordinary*. And here, unfortunately, the proverbial and alphabetical portrait of unique strength and power has too often become a domestic prison of flawed and restricted potential and possibilities – as if any of us would even think of confining Luisa to scrubbing toilets.

With Rafiki in *The Lion King*, we need to look *harder*.

Here is no cage, no box, no restricting forcefield; here is potential unleashed to impact the wide world in ways that mother of Lemuel couldn’t even begin to imagine even as she glimpses it and calls it forth.

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

What do you see in this portrait of the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31? Do you see a cage?

Limitations? Restrictions? Or do you see empowerment and potential? Why? And if you’re a man, what are your takeaways from it?

PRAY

Lord, let your words – particularly these words in Proverbs –
be more than slapshot hockey pucks to me;

Let them be your empowerment in and upon me

of whatever gender I may be

to become all that you are creating and shaping me to be right where I am.

Through your mercies.

Wednesday, May 8

Ditch the list!

Today's Scripture reading: Proverbs 31.10-31 (MSG)

READ

A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve, and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended & ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colorful linens and silks.

Her husband is greatly respected when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them, brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.

Her clothes are well-made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly.
She keeps an eye on everyone in her household and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise:
"Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!"

Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.
Give her everything she deserves!
Adorn her life with praises!

This is God's word.

REFLECT

What if I tried it all? What if I took "biblical womanhood" literally?

That was the question that welled up within Rachel Held Evan's imagination as she contemplated the true nature of "biblical womanhood," leading to the year-long experiment in doing just that – living out as literally as possible what women are told to do both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in our New Testaments – is the reason for the subtitle of her book: *How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband Master*.

Journalist A.J. Jacobs did essentially the same thing as a yearlong experiment, only as a man (since, well, he's a man), recording his journey in his book *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. Both books are well worth the read – not only for the humor and anecdotes, which are top notch, but for the poignancy of the observations. Each book narrates the journey and the discoveries one month at a time.

Both authors became greatly annoying to those around them – especially to their spouses.

Rachel acknowledges that "within a couple of weeks I was annoying my friends with random facts about biblical womanhood."

She continues:

Take Proverbs 31, for example. As it turns out, we have a woman to thank for the ancient acrostic poem that outlines in excruciating detail the daily activities of an excellent wife, perpetuating a three-thousand-year-old inferiority complex among just about every woman in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The poem is recorded in the Bible by King Lemuel as “an oracle his mother taught him,” a fact that totally upset my plan to cast the Proverbs 31 woman as an unrealistic archetype of the misogynistic imagination.

The Proverbs 31 woman
rises before the sun each day,
plans every meal,
strengthens her arms,
goes to the market,
brings home exotic foods,
runs a profitable business,
dresses her husband and children,
invests in real estate,
cares for the poor,
compliments her husband,
spends hours at the loom,
and burns the midnight oil,
before starting it all over again the next day.

[Did she mention doing twelve impossible things before breakfast?]

This, according to the oracle, is what a man should look for in a wife, which of course leads me to believe that King Lemuel’s mom was the kind who didn’t actually want a daughter-in-law. (Add a shrug of the shoulders and the accent of a Jewish grandmother to “A wife of noble character who can find?” and you get what I mean.)

No wonder we so often don’t see a portrait to absorb and then creatively translate into the here and now of who and where we are but instead see a heavy load of expectations under which to groan. Or a hockey puck to dodge or deflect. And it doesn’t help when we of the male persuasion keep insisting on treating this as a prescriptive list as we keep slapshotting these lines at the women in our lives like hockey pucks of impossible expectations that just happen to serve us.

Put away the hockey sticks, ditch the lists.

And take in the portrait and what it has for each of us – no matter our gender.

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

How can we stop relating to scripture – especially poetic descriptions such as those twenty-two verses of Proverbs 31 – as prescriptive, formulaic, one-size-fits-all-for-all-time rules? How do we relax, absorb such a portrait as this, breathe in the divine intention and breathe out the creatively inspired translation into life God would bring into being in and through us?

PRAY

Lord, let your words – particularly these words in Proverbs –
be more than slapshot hockey pucks to me;
Let them be your empowerment in and upon me
of whatever gender I may be
to become all that you are creating and shaping me to be right where I am.
Through your mercies.

Amen

Thursday, May 9

You're fussing far too much

Today's Scripture reading: Mark 10.38-42 (MSG)

READ

As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village.
A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him
and made him feel quite at home.

She had a sister, Mary,
who sat before the Master,
hanging on every word he said.

But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen.

Later, she stepped in, interrupting them.

“Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me?
Tell her to lend me a hand.”

The Master said, “Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much
and getting yourself worked up over nothing.

One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—
it's the main course and won't be taken from her.”

This is God's word.

REFLECT

So today I'm being a little bit less of a hockey puck –
which, btw is my primary goal each morning as I wake:
'Lord, may I be a little less of a hockey puck today, by thy mercies.'

I led with a different passage, you see, giving you a break from the list – er, portrait of the
Proverbs 31 woman.

Instead, we have a portrait of two Proverbs 31 women who ended up on something of a collision
course – the two sisters Mary and Martha. They forever remain on that collision course, the one
pitted against the other, the one standing opposite the other – like the tall statues of Robert E. Lee
and George Meade eternally squaring off against one another over the mile of open ground
between Seminary and Cemetery Ridge in Gettysburg. I found Rachel's revisiting of the story
refreshing, so rather than looking at an idealized portrait again today, let's take in a real snapshot
of two worthy women at work and see how, just maybe, they don't have keep colliding after all.

Martha—not the one in my cookbook, but the one in the Bible—was one of Jesus' closest friends and
disciples. According to the gospels of Luke and John, she opened her home to Him, shared meals with
Him, and stood by His side as He raised her brother, Lazarus, from the dead. John reports that “Jesus
loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” That Martha's name appears before her brother's suggests that
this woman garnered considerable respect among the earliest followers of Jesus.

Despite her esteemed status, poor Martha is best known today for a less-than-flattering incident
involving her sister, Mary.

As the story goes, Jesus and some of His followers were traveling through the town of Bethany, where “Martha opened her home to [them],” serving food and offering shelter for the night. Since sudden overnight company is the leading cause of insanity among women, Martha got a little stressed out with all the preparations that go into hosting a troupe of tired, hungry, first-century Jewish men for the weekend. Perhaps after attempting to grate some horseradish, she charged into the next room, where Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to His teachings. “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?” Martha demands. “Tell her to help me!” Folks were always asking Jesus to intervene in family disputes and other seemingly trivial matters. You would think this would have irritated Him, being God-in-flesh and all, but His response to Martha was gentle, almost tender. “Martha, Martha,” he said, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

The *Precious Moments New King James Version* of the Bible that I toted around to Sunday school as a child included a cartoon illustration of this story that depicted Mary kneeling at the feet of Jesus, looking quite like the Virgin herself, with hands clasped together in prayer, body positioned at a perfect ninety-degree angle, eyes closed, and head covered, while Martha, looking rather like a Disney stepsister, with an enormous nose, angular jaw, and kooky hairdo, cast an exaggerated glare at her sister while balancing a platter of grapes in her hands—a sharp contrast between the servant and the student, considering the fact that good Christian girls are generally expected to be both.

Feminists like me love this story. Here we have Jesus gladly teaching a woman who was bold enough to study under a rabbi, which was patently condemned at the time. However, conservatives note that Martha served future meals to Jesus and His disciples, suggesting that Jesus called Martha out on her critical attitude, not her role as a homemaker. As tempting as it is to cast Mary and Martha as flat, lifeless foils of each other—cartoonish representations of our rival callings as women—I think that misses the point. Martha certainly wasn’t the first and she won’t be the last to dismiss someone else’s encounter with God because it didn’t fit the mold...

I guess we’re all a little afraid that if God’s presence is there, it cannot be here.

Caring for the poor, resting on the Sabbath, showing hospitality and keeping the home—these are important things that can lead us to God, but God is not contained in them. The gentle Rabbi reminds us that few things really matter and only one thing is necessary. Mary found it outside the bounds of her expected duties as a woman, and no amount of criticism or questioning could take it away from her. Martha found it in the gentle reminder to slow down, let go, and be careful of challenging another woman’s choices, for you never know when she may be sitting at the feet of God.

Oh yes. That preaches...

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

To which “worthy woman” portrait are you inclined – whether male or female? How can we better embrace and harmonize both dynamics within ourselves and with one another?

PRAY

Lord, may I

man or woman

be ever so careful in challenging the choices of others

since to their own master they will stand or fall

and I’m not that master.

Break me of the habit (again, and then again) of ever trying to be

my sister’s or my brother’s keeper in all the wrong ways,

and gently remind me today that the one I would challenge and judge

may indeed be sitting at your feet.

Amen

Friday, May 10

An Ode to Woman

Today's Scripture reading: Proverbs 31.10-31 (MSG)

READ

A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve, and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended & ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colorful linens and silks.
Her husband is greatly respected when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them, brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.
Her clothes are well-made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly.
She keeps an eye on everyone in her household and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise:
"Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!"

Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.
Give her everything she deserves!
Adorn her life with praises!

This is God's word.

REFLECT

Another executive decision. Today Rachel writes the devotions. I hadn't read the chapter of her book *The Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband 'Master'* in which she in more depth takes on the "P31 Woman." It was nice to read her saying the same things I did about this Proverbs 31 portrait earlier in the week. We need to hear it again. From Rachel...

* * *

[The Proverbs 31 Woman]...wander into any Christian women's conference, and you will hear her name whispered around the coffee bar and lauded from the speaker's podium. Visit a Christian bookstore (note: these still existed in 2010), and you will find entire women's sections devoted to books that extol her virtues and make them applicable to modern wives. At my Christian college, guys described their ideal date as a "P31 girl," and young women looking to please them held a "P31 Bible Study" in my dormitory lounge at 11 p.m. on Mondays.

She's like the evangelical's Mary—venerated, idealized, glorified to the level of demigoddess, and yet expected to show up in every man's kitchen at dinnertime. Only unlike Mary, there is no indication that the Proverbs 31 woman actually existed.

The subject of a twenty-two-line poem found in the last chapter of the book of Proverbs, the “wife of noble character” is a tangible expression of the book's celebrated virtue of wisdom.

She appears in an oracle attributed to the mysterious King Lemuel that the text says was taught to him by his mother. Although the genre of royal instruction is a familiar one in ancient Near Eastern literature, this poem stands out in its representation of the queen mother as the source of wisdom and remains the longest, most flattering tribute to women of its time. Packed with hyperbolic imagery, the poem is an acrostic, so the first word of each verse begins with the next consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This communicates a sense of totality as the poet praises the everyday achievements of an upper-class Jewish wife, a woman who keeps her household functioning day and night by buying, trading, investing, planting, sewing, weaving, managing servants, extending charity, providing food for the family, and preparing for each season. She is so accomplished, in fact, that translators can't seem to agree on an adjective to describe her. Depending on who you ask, a lucky man will find:

- “a good wife” (New Century Version)
- “an excellent wife” (New American Standard)
- “a competent wife” (Common English Bible)
- “a capable wife” (Good News Translation)
- “a virtuous and capable wife” (New Living Translation)
- “a wife of noble character” (New International Version)
- “a virtuous woman” (King James Version)
- “a worthy woman” (American Standard Version)
- “a valiant woman” (Douay-Rheims American Edition)
- “a capable, intelligent, and virtuous woman” (Amplified Bible)

However, most scholars seem to think that the Hebrew *eshet chayil* is best translated “valorous woman,” for the structure and diction employed in the poem closely resembles that of a heroic poem celebrating the exploits of a warrior.

* * *

“The exploits of a warrior.” Whoa. Pause – and to be continued tomorrow...

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

We've been reading this ode to “an upper-class Jewish woman” from ancient times who never existed ...how about trying your hand at writing your own to the very much real and living mother or woman in your life? How would you celebrate her exploits? When's the last time you did so?

PRAY

Lord, let your words – particularly these words in Proverbs –
be more than slapshot hockey pucks to me;
Let them be your empowerment in and upon me
of whatever gender I may be
to become all that you are creating and shaping me to be right where I am.
Through your mercies.

Amen

Saturday, May 11

An Ode to Woman (continued)

Today's Scripture reading: Proverbs 31.10-31 (MSG)

READ

A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds.
Her husband trusts her without reserve, and never has reason to regret it.
Never spiteful, she treats him generously all her life long.
She shops around for the best yarns and cottons and enjoys knitting and sewing.
She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises.
She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day.
She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden.
First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started.
She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day.
She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking.
She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor.
She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended & ready to wear.
She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colorful linens and silks.
Her husband is greatly respected when he deliberates with the city fathers.
She designs gowns and sells them, brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops.
Her clothes are well-made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile.
When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly.
She keeps an eye on everyone in her household and keeps them all busy and productive.
Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise:
"Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!"

Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
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Give her everything she deserves!
Adorn her life with praises!

This is God's word.

REFLECT

Okay, rewind, continue, and finish with Rachel Held Evans from her book *The Year of Biblical Womanhood*...

* * *

Most scholars seem to think that the Hebrew *eshet chayil* is best translated "valorous woman," for the structure and diction employed in the poem closely resembles that of a heroic poem celebrating the exploits of a warrior.

Lost to English readers are the militaristic nuances found in the original language (*emphasis added*):

"she provides *food* for her family" (literally, "prey," v.15);
"her husband . . . lacks *nothing of value*" (literally, "booty," v.11);
"she *watches* over the affairs of the household" (literally, "spies," v. 27);

“she *girds herself with strength*” (literally, “she girds her loins,” v.17 KJV);
“she can *laugh* at the days to come” (literally, “laugh in victory,” v.15).

According to Erika Moore, “the valorous wife is a heroic figure used by God to do good for His people, just as the ancient judges and kings did good for God’s people by their martial exploits.” Like any good poem, the purpose of this one is to draw attention to the often-overlooked glory of the everyday. The only instructive language it contains is directed toward men, with the admonition that a thankful husband honor his wife “for all that her hands have done” (31:31).

Old Testament scholar Ellen F. Davis notes that the poem was intended “not to honor one particularly praiseworthy woman, but rather to underscore the central significance of women’s skilled work in a household-based economy.” She concludes that “it will not do to make facile comparisons between the biblical figure and the suburban housewife, or alternately between her and the modern career woman.”

And yet many Christians interpret this passage prescriptively, as a command to women rather than an ode to women, with the home-based endeavors of the Proverbs 31 woman cast as the ideal lifestyle for all women of faith. An empire of books, conferences, products, and media has evolved from a subtle repositioning of the poem’s intended audience from that of men to that of women. One of the more popular books is titled *Becoming the Woman God Wants Me to Be: A 90 Day Guide to Living the Proverbs 31 Life*. No longer presented as a song through which a man offers his wife praise, Proverbs 31 is presented as a task list through which a woman earns it...

And here’s the thing...in Jewish culture it is not the women who memorize Proverbs 31, but the men. Husbands commit each line of the poem to memory, so they can recite it to their wives at the Sabbath meal, usually in a song. “*Eshet chayil mi yimtza v’rachok mip’ninim michrah*,” they sing in the presence of their children and guests. “A valorous woman, who can find? Her value is far beyond pearls.” *Eshet chayil* is at its core a blessing—one that was never meant to be earned, but to be given, unconditionally. It’s like their version of ‘You go, girl!’

* * *

Which means, people – men and husbands, sons and daughters – we mustn’t turn an ode into orders or an anthem into an assignment; we just need to start singing...

RELATE

So, as we pause for a moment of personal reflection and prayer, ponder:

How are you being prompted to creatively celebrate the exploits of your mother or of the woman in your life?

PRAY

Lord, give me the grace to rise up and bless the women in my life
to look beyond any perceived flaws and disappointments
and to truly, gratefully, humbly, authentically
sing my own ode to the gift of woman
in the face of my own mother
and beyond.

Amen

Sunday, May 12

A Liturgy for Changing Diapers

From *Eshet Chayil* to a liturgy for changing diapers. Once again, who says prayer isn't practical. In fact, this prayer liturgy may be broadened in its use to encompass all the lowly, unrecognized, unsought, and unappreciated activities we perform, whether we're male or female. So, broaden its use as needed, but lean into it if and when you are, quite literally, changing a diaper. Especially at in the wee hours of the morning. This is from *Every Moment Holy, Volume 1 New Liturgies for Daily Life* by Douglas Kaine McKelvey:

O GOD,

in such menial moments as this—
the changing of a diaper—
I would remember this truth:

My unseen labors are not lost, for it is these repeated acts of small sacrifice that—
like bright, ragged patches—
are slowly being sewn into a quilt of
lovingkindness that swaddles this child.

I am not just changing a diaper.

By love and service
I am tending a budding heart that,
rooted early in such grace-filled devotion,
might one day be more readily-inclined
to bow to your compassionate conviction—
knowing itself then as both a receptacle
and a reservoir of heavenly grace.

So, this little act of diapering—
though in form sometimes felt
as base drudgery—might be
better described as one of ten thousand acts
by which I am actively creating a culture
of compassionate service and selfless love
to shape the life of this family and this beloved child.

So, take this unremarkable act of necessary service, O Christ,
and in your economy let it be multiplied
into that greater outworking of worship and of faith,
a true investment in the incremental
advance of your kingdom across generations.

Open my eyes that I might see this act
for what it is from the fixed vantage of eternity, O Lord—
how the changing of a diaper might
sit upstream of the changing of a heart;
how the changing of a heart might
sit upstream of the changing of the world.

Amen