

# A Good Wife

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## *Proverbs 31:10–31*

Did you hear that description of a good wife from the very end of the Book of Proverbs? ‘A capable wife who can find?’ (Prov. 31:10). She is a remarkable woman. She is a wife and a mother, and that’s not all. She is also a competent, diligent and astute business-woman: in trade, real estate, primary production, and cottage industry; also in small business and personnel management. In addition to this, she is active in the community: in her care for the poor and needy, in the salutary advice she has to offer, and in the public recognition that is due to her. She is able to do all this without neglecting herself: she keeps herself fit, she dresses well, she has an inner strength and dignity by which she faces the future with cheerful assurance. She has a personal relationship of respectful trust and obedient love towards God.

Just reading this through is enough to make us feel exhausted! But look at her stature and beauty! Who ever said that the Bible puts women down, or says that a woman’s place is only in the kitchen or the nursery or the marital bed?

When did the modern feminist movement begin—the 1960s? It was actually well under way before then, with agitation for votes for women in the late 1800s and early 1900s. There is a myth that before that women were always put down and kept under. Especially in the Bible. But this is in the Bible! It was written hundreds of years before Christ. There is a sense in which we still need to catch up with the great respect and esteem in which this woman is held here. I suspect that in every age there have always been strong capable women able to hold their own one way or another.

This woman in Proverbs 31 is no wimp, and no doormat. She is a person of great stature and attractiveness. I suspect there may be a few of those here with us this morning.

Let's go through it in detail. She is a wife, married to a husband. How does she regard and treat him?

She does him good, and not harm,  
all the days of her life. (v. 12)

That's pretty straightforward, isn't it? She never puts her husband down, but only ever supports and cares for him—as no doubt he does with her. The husband knows how fortunate he is to have her as his wife, and he is glad to rely on her:

The heart of her husband trusts in her,  
and he will have no lack of gain (11).

No doubt it is because of her undergirding support of him that he is able to be successful as an active and respected member of the community:

Her husband is known in the city gates,  
taking his seat among the elders of the land (23).

He is full of appreciation for her:

her husband . . . praises her:  
“Many women have done excellently,  
but you surpass them all” (28, 29).

This woman as a mother is diligent in caring for her children, in season and out of season:

She rises while it is still night  
and provides food for her household . . .  
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,  
for all her household are clothed in crimson . . .  
She looks well to the ways of her household,  
and does not eat the bread of idleness (15, 21, 27).

Her children and her husband no doubt benefit from the wise things she has to say:

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

Her children also delight in her and value her highly:

Her children rise up and call her happy (28).

As if this weren't enough, as a wife and a mother, she also has a full life outside the home. She is an astute business-woman in purchasing and trade:

She is like the ships of the merchant,  
she brings her food from far away . . .  
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.  
Her lamp does not go out at night . . .  
She makes linen garments and sells them;  
she supplies the merchant with sashes (14, 18, 24).

She is canny in real estate:

She considers a field and buys it;

and she is diligent in primary production:

with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard (16).

She runs a number of small businesses, working industriously in manufacturing and value-adding with a view to merchandising:

She seeks wool and flax,  
and works with willing hands . . .  
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.  
Her lamp does not go out at night.  
She puts her hands to the distaff,  
and her hands hold the spindle . . .  
She makes linen garments and sells them;  
she supplies the merchant with sashes (13, 18, 19, 24)

In running her household she is also competent in personnel management:

She . . . provides . . . tasks for her servant-girls (15).

Beyond all this, she is active in the community. She cares for the poor and needy:

She opens her hand to the poor,  
and reaches out her hands to the needy (20).

No doubt the salutary advice she has to offer when she 'opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue' (26) extends also out into the community. And there is public recognition of all that she does:

Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the city gates (31).

The open area just inside the city gates was where the community gathered and all civic affairs were conducted—she is recognised and honoured in that public space, and she receives a worthy return for what she has done.

She is able to do all this without neglecting herself. She keeps herself fit:

She girds herself with strength,  
and makes her arms strong (17).

She takes care of the way she looks:

She makes herself coverings;  
her clothing is fine linen and purple (22)

fine linen and purple were the best and most expensive cloth you could get—she dresses well. But she does not rely on how she looks outwardly to be the person she is. In all this she has inner qualities by which she faces the future with cheerful assurance:

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

Hers is no put-on or superficial beauty. It comes from within her.

So what is the secret of her inner strength and beauty?

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,  
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised (30).

The 'fear of the LORD' in the Bible always means having a good strong healthy respect and love for God, by which we want to do what God wants—we obey God's will and commandments. That is where this woman is coming from—she has that personal relationship of respectful trust and obedient love towards God—and that is what makes her who she is. Compare that with what the apostle Peter writes to women in the New Testament:

let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty [the imperishable jewel] of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight . . . do what is good and never let fears alarm you (1 Peter 3: 4, 6).

God told the prophet Samuel that we humans 'look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart' (1 Sam. 16:7; see also 13:14). And when God finds a heart that is after His own heart, he is mightily pleased.

So that is woman in the Bible. A person of true and substantial glory, of great stature and attractiveness. Not by standing on her own, asserting herself over against others, but in strong and respectful relationship with God, together with her husband, her family, her work-life and her work companions, in good relationship with her community, and with herself.

The world-class theologian Miroslav Volf gave a lecture in Adelaide a number of years ago, and someone asked him a question along the

lines of: 'What is the place of the feminine in your theology?' He gave an interesting answer: 'I'm not sure there is such a thing as "the feminine"—or "the masculine". What I do know is that there are women, and there are men, and we relate with each other'. A pretty straightforward answer.

The opening assessment of this remarkable woman at the end of the book of Proverbs is:

She is far more precious than jewels (10).

At the beginning of the book of Proverbs there is another female figure who is spoken of in terms very much like this remarkable woman, and this is what is said of her:

She is more precious than jewels,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her (Prov. 3:15; compare 8:11; 20:15).

Who is this talking about—the 'capable wife'? No, this is someone who is called 'Wisdom', and this wisdom of God is depicted as a female figure:

Happy are those who find wisdom,  
and those who get understanding . . .  
She is more precious than jewels (Prov. 3:13, 15).

The whole of the book of Proverbs is about the wisdom of God:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov. 9:10)

See how the Bible regards true wisdom and insight as coming from knowing God in a healthy respectful relationship, such as the capable woman at the end of Proverbs has with God? It is this wisdom of God that we so desperately need from God to be able to live our lives as human beings, made in the image of God, in this world that God has made. The good woman at the end of the book of Proverbs is a

live embodiment of this practical wisdom and maturity across all aspects of living. She shows how it is lived out.

So there is something about the way the good wife conducts herself that applies not just to her but to all of us in relation to God and His wisdom. The way she is in herself, and the outcomes of her life, are the way we are all to be in the wisdom of God. This wisdom is not just being clever. It is moral more than it is intellectual: 'The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil'. Wisdom says: 'I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice'. It is also relational: the Wisdom of God says, 'I love those who love me' (Prov. 8:13, 20, 17).

That's all from the Old Testament. Let's take it one step further. In the New Testament, who is it who is called 'wisdom from God'? Our Lord Jesus Christ, when he was crucified. Paul the apostle says:

Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness [and sanctification and redemption] (1 Cor. 1:30).

How come? When I preached once before on the remarkable woman at the end of the book of Proverbs, one woman said to me afterwards, 'It made me feel so inadequate'. I don't think she just meant as a woman or a wife, but as a person. Some of us may have come into that same feeling. How do we cope with it when we have been less than wise, and less than righteous?

In the New Testament we are told that Jesus came. He is called the 'bridegroom', and we his people are called his 'bride' (John 3:29; compare Rev. 19:5–9). As such, he is the one who 'takes away the sins of the world' (John 1:29). He went to the cross for us and bore our sins away—our unrighteousness, and our lack of love, our immaturity and our silliness—and he spoke of a wedding banquet that he would have with us in his Father's house. All of that magnificent saving action is what the New Testament calls the

wisdom of God. It is by our faith in Christ, by accepting his great salvation and the forgiveness of all our sins in him, and being clothed in all his righteousness in love, that we come to stand where that bride, that good wife, is. How are we depicted right at the end of the New Testament? As the Bride of God, prepared and purified by God, for a loving respectful practical relationship with God, for ever. We are part of that bride, that mature and capable wife, here and now. And to God we are 'more precious than jewels'.