

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Proverbs 31

31.1. While Paul writes, inspired by the Holy Spirit, “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man” (1 Timothy 2.12) he means in a formal and public way in the congregation, as the passage 1 Corinthians 14.34-35 shows. However, the mother may teach her child and, as the child is the father of the man, such words will very likely have a profound influence. Here is a word from the Lord given to a woman for her son and for the church at large.

It would seem possible that Lemuel was not a child when these words were uttered to him but already a king given over to wine and women. If so, it is not difficult to see how an older and wiser Solomon would have found these words to ring true to his own experience and therefore he was glad to afford them a place in his writings. We cannot be sure that this is how it happened, and it does not matter, for it is the topic that is all important.

31.2-9. There are many shades of meaning that could be given to this questioning “what?” For myself, it seems relevant to refer it to the first two occasions in the scriptures that the word “what” as a question (it occurs as a non-question in Genesis 2.19) appears. The Lord addresses the woman, “What is this that thou hast done?” (Genesis 3.13) He addresses Cain, “What hast thou done?” (Genesis 4.10) It would be a perfectly possible understanding to see here that Lemuel’s mother is confronting her son, the king, in the midst of his harlotry and heavy drinking with his lords.

Her plea is irresistible. My son, have you not dishonoured yourself and your office? Have you not dishonoured the mother who bore you? Have you not dishonoured the Lord whose answer to my prayers you were? It would be a salutary reminder to us if we do wrong, that we wrong ourselves and our employment, our parents and family and, supremely, the Lord God Himself.

The more responsible our work, the more important it is that our minds are not clouded by alcohol. It adds to the disgrace if we indulge in such conviviality with colleagues, perhaps rendering the whole establishment incompetent and giving to it a bad reputation.

If that establishment be a king's court, the court of justice, then justice is impoverished. Forgetfulness of the finer points of detail of the law and perverting the course of justice becomes entrenched – “any of the afflicted” is a term that suggests as much.

If strong drink is to have any place at all let it be for the swift reviving of “him that is ready to perish” whether physically or emotionally; and wine “that maketh glad the heart of man” to the sad. Let it be largesse not wantonness. Let it minister to the building up, not the ruination, of the poor afflicted one.

Where there has been drunken incompetence let there be words of wisdom to rescue those for whom miscarriage of justice is bidding fair to lead to death; intervene, speak up on their behalf, and uphold and defend them.

Such is the way to redeem a lost cause; the lost cause of the monarch, his courtiers and his subjects.

31.10. Now follows an acrostic. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and each verse to the end of the chapter begins with each successive letter. It is not merely a stylistic convention, but an aid to memorisation. It is brilliantly translated. Without any attempt to reproduce the acrostic element in English, the logical flow of the passage is not thereby diminished.

These words are the gift of the Holy Spirit. Maybe the words originated with Lemuel's mother and king Lemuel under the Spirit's guidance wove them into this form. Maybe Lemuel's mother learned them herself in the acrostic form. The language is heightened to match the sublime subject matter of such great importance to the mutual benefit of the relationship between men and their wives. This passage speaks to our day about the achievements of marriage, where two are better than one (Ecclesiastes 4.9), where work is the foundation of the marriage and where children are the fruit of a secure and long standing marriage.

The question, “Who can find a virtuous woman?” is not asked in any demeaning way, as if this was well-nigh an impossibility. Rather, it is of great encouragement - to a man to expect to find such, and, if he does, what a great impetus to all his affairs, family, business and spiritual it will be; and to the woman to model herself in principle on these noble qualities which, while they are obtainable outside of Christ, are supremely attainable to one seeking closely the wisdom which is in our Lord Jesus Christ. A believing woman might model herself on these qualities and enhance them in conjunction with Philippians 4. 8-9. “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be

any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.”

“The price of wisdom is above rubies” (Job 28.18; and it is very similarly expressed in Proverbs 3.15). Some things are beyond price; no monetary value can be placed on them; they are precious and irreplaceable to the one who exercises them and to the one who benefits from them.

31.11. The heart of her husband is her first concern. By which is meant his affections and his inner, emotional well-being. His aims are secure with her; his faults are between him and her alone; their mutual love is not polluted from another source. “No need of spoil” is a telling phrase. Spoils are the entitlements of a victorious army. An unmarried man might legitimately take as spoils of war a beautiful woman (Deuteronomy 21. 10-11). But after a long absence a soldier with such a wife at home will not be tempted, for his thoughts are all towards his virtuous and faithful wife. There is no need of any provision outside the home environment; and while his work may take him away his heart and her heart are secure in their love for one another.

31.12. Her input to his life is positive, not merely refraining from evil. It begins with her care and nurture of his inner welfare and extends to outward and public affairs. In such a relationship the subservience of the woman and the dominance of the man is mitigated in a wonderful manifestation of the relationship between the believer, the church and the Saviour which answers the end of marriage. Whereas in Genesis 3.16 the Lord ruled that, “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” the fulfilment of these things here is mutual and, by the loving endorsement in the scriptures of the approval of God Himself, the rule is greatly softened.

31.13. It is very much an issue today as to where our food supplies are sourced from. Part of her remit is the ordering of her materials from wherever she can get the best deal, or in this instance, the best material. So behind her labours are the sourcing of information as to the best available material and provisions which her industrious lifestyle enables her to provide. “She worketh willingly with her hands.” What follows is not only the description of elevated “independent” womanhood but also a strong work ethic for the administration and example of her family, and the household of family servants. Her sphere is not merely the home for she may consider the purchase of a field (31.16) and make a unilateral decision.

31.14. While the issue today is to source locally it was then the ability to purchase the appropriate supplies from wherever the best could be obtained. In an elegant metaphor she is likened to a stately ship which conveys goods from afar; she provides the very best.

31.15. However, this is not the indolence of wealth or position. Her work begins early to organise the food supply for the day for as many as her household numbers. She is an organiser with all that entails; for she knows early on in the day what supplies she will need to order and bring in – nothing is done in a last moment rush.

31.16. There is a telling description in Genesis 24.10 concerning Abraham's steward that, "all the goods of his master were in his hand." In Genesis 39.4-6 Potiphar in making Joseph his steward left "all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had." Such is the purpose of having a steward and "it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4.2). Ministers are "stewards of the mysteries of God" and all believers are to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4.10). So we may study this picture and think of ourselves in relation to the provisions we supply to our fellow believers. This wife organised the home and every matter that related to its welfare and efficiency. While not having the office of steward she incorporated all stewardship disciplines into her married status. As the bride of Christ the church's members should act likewise in spiritual things. She did not indulge in gossip - it is passed over in silence. There was no time for that. Her energies were put to nobler use, as ours should be. Read again at this juncture Matthew 25. 14-30. With the resources of her own industry at her disposal and the trust placed in her, she uses her own discretion and purchases a field and organises its cultivation. Though the resources are of her own earning, yet they are for the family good.

31.17. Though organisation is her forte this verse suggests that she is not averse to giving a physical lead; perhaps demonstrating how and where things should be planted or, whenever necessary, doing it all herself. This lady is no workshy gadabout.

31.18. She examines the quality of her purchases when they arrive to see that they pass muster. At whatever time they are anticipated she is waiting for them, to check them before it is too late to return them.

31.19-20. As was much more the practice in days gone by she was a "manufacturer," using her hands in all manner of tasks to benefit the family and the poor. The passage implies, in the expression "she stretcheth out her hand," that despite her status and nobility she is gentle and kind in her approach to those who are less well-off than she is.

31.21-22. On the other hand she produces exquisitely made warm clothing for the cold weather; not luxurious, for luxury implies that a thing is to no purpose, but eminently serviceable. Her husband is doubtless "proud" to be seen in it and "proud" of the elegance of her own clothing style too.

31.23. Her husband shares in the role of the judiciary, being an elder, but carries his role with aplomb and knows that everything about him, his dress, his bearing, his health matches the importance of his work and is enhanced by his wife's provision. Everything takes its proper place; the marriage is for the home; the home is for the city state; local government is for the nation. "His foundations are in the holy mountains. The LORD loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob" (Psalm 87.1-2). When everything is in its proper perspective the mutual service and love within the home supplies the benefit and credibility of the church.

31.24-25. Not only does she provide first and foremost for the home but has a cottage industry. It is successful and profit-making. And then, with a lovely turn of phrase, notwithstanding all her elegance of style, what counts most is the elegance of her demeanour. It is every bit as distinctive as the clothing she makes. "Strength and honour" are her clothing. While Peter describes ornaments (1 Peter 3. 1-6) and uses the illustration tellingly, Lemuel here speaks of principal clothing not ornaments. "She shall rejoice in time to come." In retirement? In glory? When she observes these things replicated in subsequent generations? "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8.28).

31.26-27. Not only is she practical but she exercises wisdom and kindness. What a fruitful combination this is! She casts a kindly eye over "the ways of her household." That is over their behaviour and their problems. Her influence is pastoral within that sphere. She works hard; they work hard. They take their lead from her in love.

31.28. When our children have grown up and perhaps raised children themselves and have compared what they have achieved with their children with what we achieved with them, if they then arise up and call us blessed that is a job well done, It is not always the case, else notice would not have been taken of it here. Her husband has nothing but commendation. Indeed we shall rejoice in time to come if this be the case with us. May we do better than we know and the time to come declare it (1 Corinthians 3.13).

31.29. Earlier in our studies I have alluded to the expression, "the child is the father of the man." The characteristics honed in childhood, the habits inculcated, to a very large extent become the established norm when that child grows up. So we have had here a description of a woman in her prime. This is a daughter where the child is the mother of the woman. She has grown up, but she had her own earlier childhood. Let us seek to bring up our children in the nurture of the faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let us teach them ways of living which are consistent with His ways. We cannot all rise to the top of our profession but a believing, loving, industrious, kind, gentle and wise wife (or a single lady who can fulfil within her sphere most of these roles) will achieve better than she knows and will be approved by God and man.

31.30. Fundamental to all her achievement is her faith in the Saviour. True beauty is the “beauty of holiness” (1 Chronicles 16.29; Psalm 29.2). It is inward, and is immune from flattery.

31.31. And on this note the book of Proverbs closes, that she will freely enjoy the fruit of her labours. She will be praised by her children, by all at large and receive honourable mention “in the gates” where justice is dispensed. She is the epitome of all that is law abiding and her standards uphold the fabric of society and, indeed, under Christ, within the household of the Lord, the visible effects of her unseen influence will continue into glory. It is indeed a fitting end to this book of Christ’s wisdom and a welcome antidote to the Jewish attitude to women which came to prevail in Christ’s day, as well as to the feminism of our own.