

THE ABCs OF A GOOD WIFE

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The reason I've entitled this message the ABCs of a Wonderful Woman is that each verse begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and the writer Lemuel in describing the wonderful woman has described her in this passage from A to Z. I'm going to read the passage in the entirety at the end of the message. We'll make continual reference to it as we go through.

There are only three times in the Old Testament where this device of working through the alphabet is used. Each time it is used in a very significant place. In Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, which is the celebration of the love of God, there are 22 stanzas of eight verses each. Each one of the 22 stanzas starts with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It was an educational device used for young and old alike to teach them to celebrate the law of God, its qualities. "Oh, how I love thy law. It is my meditation day and night." One thought through the alphabet in terms of describing the law of the Lord.

Another time when this acrostic device of working through the alphabet is used is in the book of Lamentations 1, 2, 4. Those chapters begin with a succeeding letter of the alphabet. In chapter 3, every third verse begins with a succeeding letter of the alphabet. The purpose for that when in a time when the nation has been carried away to captivity, the exiles might remember from A to Z the terrible woes because of their disobedience toward God.

Here in this church, verses, 10-31 of Proverbs 31, the third and last occasions for us looking at this device of using every letter of the alphabet in the Old Testament we have described the qualities of the wonderful woman. This chapter is talking about the married woman and it is talking about a mother.

I realize when I zero in on a class of people like that I automatically may be excluding all the men, that's 50% of the congregation, and then excluding others who are perhaps not married. Or who are perhaps married and do not have children. I'd simply like to say though that the qualities, which here are described for this woman, are qualities that are beautiful upon the men as well. We can read this if we are men or if we are single from the standpoint that when the husband is being described we can substitute for that the idea of the Lord in our relationship with him. Since we are appropriately the bride of Christ.

A passage like this too, that we look at in scripture can strike us in one of three ways. Because there's such an idealized portrait of the wonderful woman it can provide aspiration for us. Here is a goal of beauty that the Lord wanted to set before my life. Wanted me to be aware of. Sometimes a passage of scripture like this is an affirmation. In reading it they sense that the Lord has helped them develop most or all of these qualities. Sometimes looking at a passage of scripture like this may cause us to look at ourselves. We compare where we really have attained versus what is being described here as the wonderful or godly person. Maybe therefore when the scripture does that it becomes not a club against us but an invitation for us to consider and to change.

The passage begins by saying "A wife of noble character who can find?" That is not a rhetorical question. As though there weren't such a person around. For the rest of the proverb is given to

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answering that question and illustrating that indeed a wife, a person of noble character, can be found.

This proverb celebrates the relationship of this woman to her husband first of all. Her husband, the text says, she is worth far more than rubies. In other words she is more valuable to her husband if she is married than any possession she has. Even as we as the body of Christ are more valuable to him than anything he has made in the created order.

This is how appropriately a husband is to look at his wife from the scriptural point of view. She indeed is to be more valuable to him than anything he owns. It is better for him to lose his job than her. It is better for him to lose his money than her. It is better for him to lose his golfing game than her. As the scriptures say of believers, To you therefore who believe he is precious so the husband may say of his wife. To you who are married to a woman, she is precious – more valuable than rubies. An elevation of relationship over material acquisition.

Her husband also deeply trusts in her as seen in verse 11. Her husband has full confidence in her. She can be confided in. They do not live in two separate worlds where he kind of goes his way and makes his judgments and she makes her judgements and goes her way. He has found in the sharing of life with her there is strength. He seeks out her advice and she is able to give him good counsel. She inspires trust in him.

In the Proverbs this is not the case with every woman. There are some very different kinds of pictures of women of indiscretion in the book of Proverbs. For example in Proverbs 25:24 “It is better to live in the corner of a housetop than in a house with a contentious woman.” This of course does not describe the person that Proverbs 31 is describing. Her husband confides in her and trusts in her. Because he confides and trusts in her he lacks nothing of value. I think that verse 11 “lacks nothing of value” doesn’t necessarily refer to things material although it’s evident from reading Proverbs 31 that this couple had it together in the material sense. But the lacking of nothing in value I think comes in an emotional and spiritual sense. The empty spaces in his life have been filled up by this woman’s love and caring. And it’s not some momentary filling up. But it is an ongoing thing. The most important need, which he the husband has, is for love and for affirmation and for encouragement. In her he lacks nothing.

I think another thing we can say about her relationship to her husband is that she causes him profit. Material profit is involved will be described by the characteristics of this wonderful woman. But here again I think in a spiritual and an emotional sense she causes him profit. She has assets for him. Her love has brought him an inner wealth.

She is for her husband always. And I might indicate this is a reciprocal relationship. As he is for her she is for him. “All the days of her life she brings him good and not harm.”

Her relationship to her family is described in terms of this woman’s providing for their physical needs and their spiritual needs. She provides clothes. And of course in biblical days there was a great deal more provision from scratch than is current in our day. In verse 13 she is described as selecting the materials for clothing. Wool and flax. But I think the thing that strikes me is the evident zest for life, which she shows. It is indicated that she works with eager hands showing a kind of buoyancy. Verse 19 also indicates this work at clothing by holding the distaff and grasping the spindle with her fingers. Both hands at work. Forming the sting, the fiber necessary for the making of the clothes.

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In verse 21 also this preparation for her family's clothing is seen when it says that "When it snows she has no fear for her household for all of them are clothed in scarlet." In other words she is like good mothers, concerned about her kids going out on cold days and getting the sniffles. She wants them to wear the sweaters and the coats and she has those ready because her heart is in to her family's needs and she's made provision.

She also is a good shopper in terms of providing the physical needs of the family. Verses 14-15 say, "She is like the merchant ships bringing her food from afar." This involved going down to a bazaar for groceries, trying to get the best produce at the right prices. I think this idea too of being a shopper indicates that included in the diet for the home from time to time is some exotic delicacy.

Her husband, by the way, is praising her for this shopping quality. In fact, she gets up while it's still dark and provides food for the family. I don't want that to be a guilt trip for you contemporary women. You've got to remember: this woman went to bed when the sun set.

There was an eagerness for life though that is shown in this idea of her rising early to make provision. She does her household chores, verse 15. When it says "She provides portions for her servant girls." She's evidently in a family of means and she had people working for her. The average woman today doesn't have that advantage. But they do have servant girls in terms of dishwashers and clothes washers and dryers, kids to do chores and the like. The same kind of thing is involved. Making provision that the household needs are met.

Verse 18 says, "Her lamp does not go out at night," in regard to all of these provisions for her family. I don't really think that this means that this woman stays up all night. Then she would not have any energy to arise before dawn. What I think this means is its talking about a day when there were no streetlights and it was very dark at night. And to have a lamp in the home did not mean having something attached to an electrical cord with a plug in, in the wall somewhere. But it meant having a little oil lamp that is available in the home, sort of a night light. So that when the kids wake up in the middle of the night and are scared they see the nightlight burning. What this is suggesting to me is that she has made provision for oil in the lamp so that there's something on in the home to provide a sense of security and safety. She's thinking ahead – concern for her family's welfare and needs.

But she ministers to the spiritual needs of her family as well, as verses 26-27 indicate. "She speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue." This is not the model of the woman as some stupid person or some person who doesn't have sense. This is a very elevated and inspired word of the Holy Spirit showing that even in the Old Testament there was that shaft of light which spoke of the dignity of woman's role in terms of counsel given and advise administered and instruction faithfully rendered. She can be counted upon to speak with wisdom. She can be counted upon to faithfully instruct. This means stepping in and saying a word in due season even when it may be uncomfortable for the children.

She knows, in fact, what's going on in her household. Verse 27 "She watches over the affairs of her household." This to me suggests that she is aware of the moods and needs and comings and goings of each member of her family unit. I would suspect that she is made aware of that not only of our interest in them but also her prayer for them and love for them.

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But this woman has a broader sphere of relationship than her husband and her family. She has a relationship to the world outside the home as well. As a wife and mother she has her priorities in appropriate order. The husband, the home, the outside world.

There's no teaching here that woman is a housewife. I refuse on income tax forms to put down the occupation of my wife as "housewife." To me, there's something demeaning about that. My wife is not married to the house. She's married to me. Therefore it is appropriate to call her wife and mother in terms of occupation or homemaker or something. But not housewife.

And she is not seen here as a housewife. Her role is not exclusively limited to the home. Her priorities are there but she takes on more.

And she takes on more and what she takes on winds up strengthening the home. Verse 16 and 24 indicate that she is an investor. "She considers a field and buys it and out of her earnings she plants a vineyard." In other words she's pretty sharp on the real estate market. That's her particular giftedness. Other gals might have a kind of cottage industry of another sort. But her ability is to size up a field, buy it at a low price, turn around, sell it at a high price and with the profit turn around and start a vineyard. That's just good capital experimentation.

Verse 24 says "She makes linen garments and sells them." Probably here having people making them for her and selling them. And she not only is an investor in this sense but there are some people who are involved in investing but then can get very cold and brittle to those who maybe don't have as much. Here's a remarkable woman in the Proverbs because she not only invests but she has care for the needs of the poor. It's not simply selfish acquisition. Verse 20 shows us "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy." Her industriousness does not make her contemptuous of the needy. She is thinking of more than her own family, more than her own small world. The house is no prison for her. It's a source of energy for her fulfillment and she is reaching out to others.

Then there is described for us as well in this proverb this beautiful woman's relationship to herself. Verse 22 says she is concerned about her clothes and the articles, which are close to her. For example, she makes coverings for her bed. I'd never really noticed that before.

This last week I was thinking of the care over the years my wife always takes in having a bedspread that she likes in the master bedroom. To me a bedspread is really not that important. The purpose of the bedspread is to get it off the bed so I can stretch out and read. A sheet will do. It doesn't bother me all that much. But part of her personality is the covering for the bed. That's an expression of her care and her concern for beauty.

This woman is concerned for that. And not only that, she is concerned about her own clothes. She is dressed in fine linen and purple, which suggests to me a kind of simple elegance in this lady's apparel.

She is not under involved in her makeup and deportment and dress. Neither is she over involved. If you want to get a picture of a woman who is over involved with her dress is sometimes take a look at Isaiah 3:18-23 which describes a quality of women who have nothing to do but dress up. And some 21 different items of apparel and cosmetics are noted there. The prophet strongly protests against the selfishness of the kind of life that is only concerned about how one looks. This woman has a good balance.

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She is secure and self-confident. Verse 25. “She is clothed with strength and dignity. She can laugh at the days to come.” Why is that important? She can laugh at the days to come – those are the days of advancing age. When physical beauty is not what it was at an earlier age. But she’s strong and confident. Why? Because there has been a strength and dignity and grace in her life. She is inwardly fulfilled, verse 27. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Verse 17 suggests that she has physical stamina. She sets about her work vigorously. “Her arms are strong for her task.”

I don’t think she just drummed this physical stamina up somewhere. I think maybe her husband encouraged her and maybe she encouraged herself to get on an exercise routine. Who knows? Maybe she was a jogger. And that’s why she could set about her work so vigorously. It’s hard to be active in all these kinds of things if we are physically tired out through lack of exercise and proper diet.

Her work. She has a sense of satisfaction. She sees that her trading is profitable.

At the bedrock of all of this I think is her relationship with God. That accounts to me for her across the board success in all of her relationships. She is described at the end of the proverb as a woman who fears the Lord. Verse 30 “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” This idea of “fearing the Lord” as you know does not refer to some quality, which goes around in cowering fear of what God is going to do. The word “fear” suggests reverence for God. Awe in the presence of God. Worship toward God. It means literally putting the Lord first in one’s life. This is what makes possible all the rest. This whole passage therefore of the wonderful woman strikes the beautiful balance that there’s sort of an inner linkage, the relationship with the Lord is then backed up with good relationships within family and husband and work and the like.

The conclusion to this, and here I speak especially to mothers on this day, what do her children do? They rise up and call her blessed. I know that the idea of “they rise up” simply means they stand for her. But I would like to suggest to a kind of symbolic meaning. That where there is mothering of children that is done in an atmosphere of wholesomeness and prayer and spirituality, indeed children do rise up. They grow up. And they don’t grow up in a kind of stunted way. But in a wholesome way. And again we recognize still when a child is growing the mother cannot make the spiritual decisions for them. There comes a moment when the child themselves must decide, this woman has been blessed in that her children have not gone away from her. There are some mothers who fit all of these qualities and yet their children have not risen up and called them blessed. And that brings sadness.

They call her blessed. And her husband, what does he do? Many men would feel threatened by a woman such as this. She just appears to have it so together. But he feels so secure by her that he is now among the elders of the land and he takes his place every day at the city gate.

Her husband has let her talents develop rather than putting her down. He is somewhere because of it. And he thinks she’s the greatest. She is no slave of a master husband but a person in her own right who takes a full and honored place in the life of home and community. He not only thinks she’s super but he tells her that as well. Which is the lament I hear from time to time from wives. “I know you love me but would you say it every once in a while.”

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What does the believing community do? They praise her. They praise her at the city gate, in the most public place they give her honor. That seems to me what is involved in the spirit of Mother's Day. That we take special time on this day to give God thanks for the women who have brought us into the world and loved us and cared for us. We rise up at the city gate and praise her.

I've done a kind of fresh translation, paraphrase of Proverbs 31, which attempts to capture the spirit of Proverbs 31 in a contemporary sense. I have chosen to use the English alphabet from A to Z doing to this proverb what the Hebrew alphabet did in 22 letters. So I would like to read a phrase from the New International Version and then read a fresh paraphrase that takes us through the alphabet which puts before us a contemporary picture of the ABCs of the wonderful woman.

The NIV: A wife of noble character, who can find?

A sounds good there so we'll use it: a wife of noble character, who can find?

"She is worth more than rubies."

Better is she than money, real estate, stocks and bonds or priceless jewelry.

"Her husband has full confidence in her."

Confidence her husband has in her.

"And lacks nothing of value."

Deep is the satisfaction he feels toward her. The empty spaces of his need for human love are all filled up.

"She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life."

Endlessly, without exception she blesses and benefits her husband.

"She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands."

Finding work to do, she does it willingly.

"She is like the merchant ships bringing food from afar."

Groceries brought home from the supermarket are well chosen and may include a delightful surprise or two.

"She gets up while it is still dark and provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls."

Head starts on each day mark her lifestyle and she makes sure her family has food to eat and that the dishwasher, oven, crock pot, washing machine and dryer and even the kids have something to do from time to time.

"She considers a field and buys it and out of her earnings she plants a vineyard."

Investing skills pay off when she turns over a piece of property and from her profits starts a small business on the side.

"She sets about her work vigorously. Her arms are strong for her tasks."

Jogging has built her body's endurance and she can do more without getting tired out.

"She sees that her trading is profitable and her lamp does not go out at night."

Keeping a wholesome sense of self-esteem about her productivity as a person is characteristic of her.

Leaving a flashlight by her bed at night is an expression of her readiness to rise in the dark to attend to the needs of her children.

(There is also a variant reading in the original on this which goes something like this: Loading up the car tank with gasoline before the stations close for the weekend is another of her winsome qualities.)

"In her hands she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers."

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Making something beautiful by sewing, painting, writing, decorating, planting or some other activity is but another trait of her creative zest for life.

“She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.”

Noticing people who need help, are lonely, sick or hurting, she is quick to show concern and give assistance as best she can.

“When it snows she has no fear for her household for all of them are clothed in scarlet.”

Onsets of colder weather demonstrate anew her loving concern for family. Everyone has warm sweaters and coats to wear.

“She makes covering for her bed. She is clothed in fine linen and purple.”

Personal touches of her individuality are seen even in the master bedroom bedspread and she wears clothes of simple elegance and beauty.

“Her husband is respected at the city gate where he takes his seat among the leaders of the land.”

Quite respected is her husband in the community and the church for his opinion and counsel are sought by others.

“She makes linen garments and sells them and supplies the merchants with sashes.”

Retailing her handmade articles is one way she has of supplementing the family’s income.

“She is clothed with strength and dignity.”

Strength and dignity of character adorn her life.

“She can laugh at the days to come.”

Triumphantly therefore she approaches advancing age knowing her self esteem is secured by something deeper than the youthful look.

“She speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue.”

Uttering helpful healing and practical words is a trademark of her speech.

“She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.”

Very aware of the strengths and weaknesses, longings and needs, comings and goings of each family member and if she stays in bed or sets around too long she is not feeling good or something’s wrong.

“Her children rise up and call her blessed. Her husband also and he praises her.”

Wonderful mother is what her children say about her and her husband not only thinks she’s the greatest but he tells her so.

“Many women do noble things but you surpass them all,” says her husband.

Xerox copies of you cannot be made he says. You’re the original and no one else comes close.

“Charm is deceptive and beauty if fleeting but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”

Youthful games girls play to catch their men sometimes hide reality and good looks don’t last.

The really beautiful woman whose charm does not fade is the one who looks to the Lord pleasing God is at the bedrock of her life.

“Give her the rewards she has earned and let works bring her praise in the city gate.”

Zucchini is no reward for a woman like this. A dozen red, long stem roses, a hug and kiss and some heartfelt praise is what this woman deserves. She has earned the respect and admiration of all.

A to Z the wonderful woman.

Lord, on this wonderful day that we have to celebrate we give you thanks. I thank you personally, Lord, for the mother you have given to me. All of us together thank you for the creative plan of life that you instituted. Perhaps there are some here today who cannot go back to warm memories of mother. But I thank you that in our lives as believers that your presence fills up the vacancies that may have been created by the lack of human love like we perceived it and needed it. You also give us the grace as Christians to forgive others even

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our parents when they have fallen short. We do take this scripture today as a model of what life can be if we follow you. That it's like somehow being clay in your hands, that we are put on the wheel. As we allow ourselves to be molded by you ultimately coming forth out of our life when all is said and done is work of beauty and grace, dignity and elegance. Thank you, Lord, that you are building out of the lumber of our life something good and beautiful. Help us, Lord, to individually be aware of those pressures that come that mar the strength of our being and our walk with you. Grant us, Lord, the power of purpose to do your will and see your will in our lives through to its ultimate conclusion. We thank you that it does pay to serve you. We bless your name this day and we give you tanks for these moments we have shared together. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.