

The Unwanted Virtuous Woman

By Barrington H. Brennen

Warning! What you are about to read may change your life. Making a choice to read further will expose you to ideas that may cause you to think and act differently.

For hundreds of years preachers in Christian pulpits have preached about the Bible's concept of a virtuous woman. They have eloquently expostulated on perhaps the most colorful description of a woman in the Bible found in Proverbs 31:10-31. There is no other Biblical passage that makes both women and men so proud about how God values women and their role in the home and society. The closing verse of the passage beautifully capsulates the virtuous woman with these poignant words: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate." (New International Version). Have you ever wondered why there is no specific passage about the "virtuous man?" As mentioned in my previous article, "The Unwanted Virtuous Man," read Proverbs 31:10-31 and turn it into the "virtuous man."

You should have read Proverbs 31:10-31 already to help you better understand the information in this article. Firstly, the writer of the "virtuous woman" (wife) begins the passage with a question: "Who can find a virtuous wife?" When we compare this question with the final verse of the passage, it is clear that there were wives at that time who were not virtuous or noble. Secondly, note that the passage uses the word "wife" because traditionally all women were required to get married. However, it will not do an injustice to the passage to use the words woman or wife interchangeably. Thirdly, the word "virtuous" can be substituted with the word "noble" indicating that the scope of the passage is not limited to the traditional sexual or "feminine" concept of a woman. Fourthly, the characteristics mentioned could not be a description of a single woman. We can rightly ask the question, how could a woman do all these things? The passage seems to be a composite picture of the freedom and rights of women, how God values them, and how they should be valued by their husbands.

PURPOSE OF THE PASSAGE

I am sure you have heard the saying that "a woman's place is in the home." I am suggesting that a proper study of "the virtuous woman" in Proverbs 31 gives us the idea that a woman's role is not only in the home. Let me conjecture that another statement to balance the picture is "a man's role includes also being in the home." Does that make us feel uncomfortable? What I am attempting to do in this article is to compare Proverb 31:10-31 with Ephesians 5:21-25, and to examine the role of women mentioned in both passages. Why am I doing this? Because for too long ministers of the gospel, teachers, community leaders, motivational speakers, and others have talked about what a good woman should be by quoting Proverbs 31:10-31, but prefer our women to live the restricted lifestyle of Paul's Ephesians 5 women. In other words, I don't believe that we are ready for the kind of woman described in Proverbs 31. Before you get fed up and put the paper down read further. What you will read might shock you.

MEANING OF VIRTUOUS

Note that it is only in the King James Version of the Bible that the word "virtuous" is used in Proverbs to describe women. In fact some translations say "Who can find a good wife?" A better word, as used in more accurate modern translations, is the word "noble." The word "virtuous" gives us the idea that the passage may be dealing mostly with the sexual behavior of women. This is not so. When we examine the passage we can understand why the word noble is used.

The word noble forces us to think about women differently. The Hebrew word "Hayil" translated

"noble" in Proverbs 31:10 has various shades of meaning. They are "capability," "skill," "substance," "valor." In fact, it is usually used to describe military might in the Old Testament (Exodus 14:4, 9, 28; Numbers 31:14; 2 Samuels 8:9; Isaiah 10:14; Micah 4:13). Interestingly, another common usage of the Hebrew word "Hayil" is "force" and "strength." It is usually used to describe the strength of mind and body of an individual. We see this in Ruth 3:11 when Boaz speaks to Ruth. He says "I know you are of noble character." (NIV) A clear interpretation would be "I know you are one of strength in mind and body." What a beautiful way to describe a woman. Even the Greek equivalent "Aret'," as found in Philippians 3:11, gives one the idea of "force" and "strength." This passage lists the things that help to build mind and body. "Whatever is true, noble, right, admirable . . . if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (KJV) A clear interpretation of the passage would be ". . . if there is anything to strengthen mind and body, think on these things."

Imagine beginning the passage in Proverbs, traditionally called "The virtuous Wife," by using the more accurate words mentioned in the previous paragraph. Then it would read: "Who can find a woman of strength in mind and body?" or "Who can find a woman of skill?", or "Who can find a woman of substance and capability?" These interpretations certainly place a new light on the passage. It helps us to think of women not as sexual property, as the word "virtuous" tends to denote, but as persons of great mental and physical ability.

DESCRIPTION OF A NOBLE WOMAN

With this clarification, let us see how the writer of Proverbs 31 describes a "woman of skill and strength." The husband fully "leans" on her or fully trusts her. Not only does the man's wife make clothing and buy food, she also engages in real estate transactions, viniculture business, and cottage industry. Both the husband and the children of this woman praise her for her industriousness. Her earning power allows her husband to be "known in the city gates and take his seat among the elders of the land" (verse 23). Here are three outstanding roles of this noble woman described in Proverbs 31:16, 26 and 27: "She considers a field and buys it . . ." "She speaks wisdom . . ." "She watches over the affairs of her household." I specifically mentioned these points because these are exactly what women in the Apostle Paul's times could not do. These are also a few of the things Bahamian women legally could not do less than sixty years ago, and are still not allowed to do in some countries today.

THE TWO WOMEN

It is always important to understand the language of the passage, the times in which the author writes, and to whom he writes before we can truly understand the meaning of a Biblical passage. During the times in which Proverbs 31 was written, women of that culture were able to do many things. Although things were not so rosy for them, there were laws that gave them much freedom allowing them to go to the market with their husbands, own property, vote, enter into discussions with male leaders, govern in the communities, etc. However, one thousand years later, during the times of the Ephesians, the Roman and Greek laws, but more so the Jewish laws, severely restricted women. Women could not get an education. They could not own property. They could not sue or be sued. In fact women were considered property themselves. In Ephesus, the Jewish law prevented women from being seen in public with their husbands. They had very little rights and power, and thus were of little value to society. Paul was ahead of his time in trying to level the play field for men and women of his day by appealing to the personal and spiritual integrity of the men in Ephesus.

HUSBANDS LOVE YOUR WIVES

When Paul states in Ephesians 5:23 and 25: "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church," and "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her . . ." he is actually empowering women in that context. Women in Ephesians had no "substance" as

the noble women in Proverbs 31. Only the men had the power and voice in the home, church, community, and government. Therefore, Paul needed men to review their concept of womanhood and treat them differently. He challenged men to uplift women socially, morally, and legally. The men had to be the "head of the home," because their women were mere female "slaves" restricted by the laws of the land. Thus, Paul is saying to these "heads of homes:" "If you treat your women the way you know Christ treats the people of God, then you will be empowering them and elevating them to the position I once gave them at creation—your equal partner. This is the true meaning of love."

You must understand that Paul was really challenging the law of the land. However, instead of directly discussing the law itself, he skillfully appeals to men, with a proper understanding of their relationship with Jesus, to make a difference through their treatment of women in their homes. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle's teachings, which strongly influenced the Greek society and all of the Western world, stated that "to be born a woman is a divine punishment, for a woman is halfway between a man and an animal." This is exactly what the men Paul was speaking to in Ephesians believed. Men, perhaps we should rethink the reasons why we are insisting that we be "head of the home" especially when our women now have equal opportunity.

THE PARADOX

What type of woman would you want your wife to be? Would it be the woman described with the freedom, rights, and equality mentioned in Proverbs 31, or the Ephesians woman who had no rights, privileges, or freedoms. I am suggesting that we love to talk about the "noble woman" in Proverbs 31, who was a woman of strength in mind and body; but we prefer to have the weak, uneducated, restricted-by-law woman who lived in Ephesus. I am suggesting that many men still have a long way to go in letting go of the concept of the traditional woman of Ephesians and accepting the liberated woman of Proverbs who "speaks wisdom and gives faithful instruction." Many men forget that Bahamian laws, since 1962 have freed women from slavery of past traditions, giving them the right to own property, vote, get an education, state their opinion freely, and help build the community. We cannot go back now. I am suggesting that the Apostle Paul is asking our Bahamian men not to seek to be "the heads of the homes" but instead to seek to "Love their wives as Christ loved the church." God made both men and women to be equal partners. Men, are you ready for the "noble woman of strength, skill, and capability?"

Email: question@soencouragement.org Barrington Brennen is a marriage and family therapist living in The Bahamas. He is available to conduct seminars anywhere in the world. Tel: 305 767 4976