

Eshet Chayil

WOMAN OF HONOR

A Study from Proverbs 31

Nancy Cunningham

As Jesus Christ prepared to send the disciples for the first time throughout Israel with His message, He included in their instructions this admonition: *“Freely you have received, freely give”* (Matt. 10:8). This six-word summary of grace explains the financial policy of the publications and audio ministries of Basic Training. All audio materials and publications are provided **without charge** to anyone who requests them. For a catalog of available materials write:



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An excellent wife,

WHO CAN FIND? FOR

her worth

IS FAR ABOVE

jewels.

THE HEART OF

her husband

TRUSTS IN HER, AND

he will have

NO LACK OF

gain.

PROVERBS 31:10–11

For Abba's little sunflower

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My first thank you goes to my husband, Gene. The first time I heard Proverbs 31 taught was while he was pastoring Harlan Park Bible Church in Conway, Arkansas. He is the one who first made these ancient concepts come alive to me, and much of what I have shared in this book I learned sitting in the pews of the church. He not only led me to Christ, but has been my faithful and true spiritual leader for the past 42 years!

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Before you begin any study of the Word of God, take a few moments to make sure that you are in fellowship with God, filled by means of the Holy Spirit. Comprehension, like everything else in the Christian life, is a gift that can be appropriated only by faith. The Bible clearly lays out three requirements that must be met before we can expect to understand God's Word. All three require nothing from us but faith.

1. **We must be believers in Jesus Christ**

(John 3:16).

It is impossible for unbelievers to understand the Word of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). Jesus declared to the leading religious leader of His day that apart from spiritual birth man is blind to the things of God. *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit ... You must be born again”* (John 3:6).

2. **We must be filled by means of the Spirit**

(1 Corinthians 2:12).

Only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God. As believers we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but when we sin, we break fellowship with God and cease to function in the power of the Spirit. When we confess our sins, God is always faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The moment we confess, we are restored to fellowship and are again under the control of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, able to learn.

3. **We must approach in faith** (Hebrews 11:6).

Only when we approach in humility, with child-like faith, will the Word of God make sense to us (Matthew 18:4; Hebrews 11:3). Where we find Scripture at odds with our ideas or our desires, we must submit to the authority of the Word. Intimacy, understanding, and power are reserved for those who are willing to do God's will (John 7:17).

Preface

I have always loved Proverbs 31. The words, the concepts, and the geographic and historical context of these verses are thousands of years old. Yet, they stand before us today with truths that transcend languages, cultures, and centuries to reach the hearts of women hungry to know God.

When I read Proverbs 31, my mind wanders back to wells in the desert, women in woven robes, and tents of goat's hair. I think of little children playing in the red dirt as camel-caravans travel by and women tend their household fires. I think of ancient people who lived in a world so far from our own and, yet, struggled with the same life issues that we struggle with today. The God who created these women of old is the same God who created you and me. The God who cared for these women is the same God who cares for you and me. And the God who imparted the truths of Proverbs 31 to these women of old is the same God who imparts these truths to you and me. Cultures and people change, but our Lord and Savior does not. He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. His truth stands!

The first time I heard Proverbs 31 taught, I was a young wife and mother of five growing children. Each and every day challenged me to reach above the mundane pile of dirty clothes and dishes in order to bring the spiritual aspect of life into the physical running of a home. I wanted to raise my family with the love of Jesus Christ. My striving was often met with failure and disappointment; yet the principles of Proverbs 31 called me to keep pursuing—by faith—a virtue and honor that could only come from my Savior!

Now, as an older woman, with the blessing of grown children and growing grandchildren, I desire to share the truths that have molded my life with those younger in the Lord. At this point, I feel I should be wiser. I should have more spiritual jewels to share and more advice to give. But I present to you what God has taught me over the years with the prayer that you might rejoice in the true value of your life in Christ—and serve Him with all your heart!

Introduction

At the time of this writing, I am sitting in a small corner room of a bamboo house high in the mountains of Papua New Guinea. Here in Numba village, the sounds of a simple life fill the air and filter through the thin walls around us. We wake to the sound of the rooster crowing before dawn, the cry of hungry babies waking from sleep, and the clang of machetes splitting wood for the morning fire. Soon the village is filled with the happy chatter of children and the muffled talk of family members beginning the day's activities.

But today, there is something extra in the air. Next door to us, a large family gathering is taking place to commemorate a special event. A man and woman have been joined together in marriage—an occasion that not only unites two people, but two families and two villages. Here in Numba, when a woman marries a man, they say “*she marries the village.*” But what is happening next door is not the marriage celebration but the giving of the bride-price—a practice still carried out in many cultures of the world today. This particular family has been paid 2,000 Kina (about \$1,000 U.S. dollars) in return for their daughter, who will be a lovely and fitting bride for the man. It is a price that takes the whole family many years to earn, save, and deliver. And so, there is celebration and fellowship over the fulfillment of a promise and the union of two parties.

I have often been filled with wonder and hope by the verses in Scripture that speak of our eternal wedding day when we will be forever joined in perfect union with our heavenly Husband—the Lord Jesus Christ (Revelation 19:6–9). In human terms, an eternal union between sinful man and the holy and righteous Son of God seems so utterly absurd. There is no common ground between the two parties, no area of compatibility, and no place for fellowship. After all, “*what fellowship has light with darkness?*” (2 Corinthians 6:14). There is absolutely nothing that we, as the Bride, have to offer in and of ourselves.

Our sinful state leaves us totally devoid of the traits a man would look for in a woman, such as inner beauty, love, faithfulness, and devotion. Who would consider such a union; who would seek such a marriage; who would be willing to pay any price at all for such a bride? The pages of Scripture give us the answer to that question.

The perfect love and grace of God deliberately sought this unlikely union for His one and only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only did the heavenly Father seek this union, but He was willing to sacrifice what was most dear and precious to Him to purchase a sinful Bride for His Son, knowing that in that eternal union the Bride would be transformed into His glory. As if that is not amazing enough, this love story gets even better!

The perfect Son was also willing. With a divine love that could only come from the throne of God, the Son left the glories of Heaven to seek His Bride. He came to earth in the form of a man to live a sinless and selfless life that led Him to the ultimate sacrifice of Calvary. There on a cross—fashioned from the very trees that He created—His hands and feet were firmly nailed. But it was not the nails that secured His place on that cross, it was something much more powerful and penetrating than mere nails—it was His love!

“For God demonstrates His love for us in that when we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

Romans 5:8

On that tree, the nails pierced His hands and feet, the crown of thorns pierced His brow, and the sins of the world pierced His heart. My sin pierced his heart. Your sin pierced His heart (Isaiah 53:5). For on that tree, He bought His Bride, not *“with perishable things like silver or gold [but with His own] precious blood”* (1 Peter 1:18–19). The Lord Jesus Christ bought His Bride with His very own life!

Through simple faith in Him and His work, we receive forgiveness and salvation, and enter into an eternal love relationship with Jesus Christ—our heavenly Husband.

There is much talk today of self-worth, self-esteem, and an earthly search for purpose and fulfillment. Anyone who seeks to find these things in the midst of an evil and fallen world must be a fool. But a sense of worth and value should flood our souls when we recognize the divine price tag that God put on your life and mine. Could there be any greater expression of love than the outstretched arms of the Son of God?

With these thoughts in mind, let us now be drawn to a beautiful passage of Scripture—Proverbs 31. These verses encourage us, as women, to be transformed by wisdom into women of excellence and honor: for our heavenly Husband, our earthly husband, our family, and the Body of believers surrounding us that we might be praised and He might be glorified! Does His love not draw us to this wisdom? Does His sacrifice not call us to this transformation?



To properly understand Proverbs 31, we must first look at its context within the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs 1:1 reveals Solomon as the author of Proverbs, and Proverbs 1:1–5 describes the purpose statement for the book: to teach wisdom, understanding, and righteousness. Its purpose is to direct us in the wise way, that is, the way of the Lord. We are told in Proverbs 1:5 that if we “*hear*” the words of Proverbs with spiritual ears, we will increase in wisdom and find wise counsel for our lives.

In a day when the world tosses about lies and deception, we should be hungry to study the Wisdom of Solomon as he was led by the Spirit of God to write this unique book. The principles found in Proverbs are just as relevant to us today as they were to those living centuries ago. The intention of this book is to explore the last chapter of Proverbs as it relates wisdom to the life of the

woman. What better place to learn how to be a good and faithful wife, lover, mother, disciple, and servant than from the God-inspired words of Proverbs. The Creator knows how to instruct His feminine creatures in the beautiful art of honor!

Proverbs 31:1–9

The last chapter of Proverbs changes from the words of Solomon to “*the words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him.*” Historically, it is unclear who King Lemuel was. The name “*Lemuel*” means “belonging to God.” In keeping with the rest of Proverbs, it is likely that King Lemuel was a name Bathsheba used for her son, Solomon. If so, the words of Proverbs 31 would be wisdom that Bathsheba herself gave to Solomon in his manhood to guide him in seeking a fitting wife. As a mother, Bathsheba had the age, experience, and spiritual insight needed to guide her son in the crucial task of choosing a woman of virtue and honor.

Solomon himself had quite a spiritual heritage in both his immediate and extended families. His father was King David, the man of whom, in spite of obvious sin and failure, God says, “*followed Me with all his heart*” (1 Kings 14:8). Solomon’s great, great grandparents were Ruth and Boaz, whose story of love and faith is recorded for us in the Book of Ruth.

In Proverbs 31:2, Lemuel is referred to as “*son of my womb,*” simply indicating the physical relationship of mother and son. But then he is spoken of as “*son of my vows.*” Lemuel’s mother indicates that she has vowed to God to raise her son according to His will and His ways. She is passionate about imparting her spiritual wisdom and discernment, especially at a time when he is seeking a woman as his life companion. She wanted to instruct him to follow in the path of his spiritual heritage—to follow the wisdom and ways of his forefathers in the faith.

As mothers, we should examine our own lives and ask, “Have I vowed to God that my sons and daughters will be raised to honor

God and fulfill His will?” This question should then be followed by an honest and prayerful daily examination of our own lives to see if our words, our prayers, and our actions are in keeping with that vow. (By the way, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and spiritual leaders can ask this same question in regard to the young people in their lives. You don’t have to be a parent to influence the direction of a young person’s life!)

Several times in Scripture, we are commanded by God to pass on to our children our spiritual heritage. Psalm 78 and Deuteronomy 6:4–7 are just a few of the passages that strongly encourage the people of Israel to pass on their faith to the following generations, so that the works and wonders of God will not be forgotten.

You may come from a family or country without a strong Christian heritage. Take heart! When you become a child of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, you are born into God’s family. You immediately have a spiritual heritage that links you to the men and women of faith throughout the Bible and throughout history. They become your spiritual ancestors—the ones after whom you pattern your faith and life.

In 1 Peter 3:6, godly women are told to follow in the example of Sarah, for “*you have become her children if you do what is right.*” We rejoice in this grand spiritual heritage. It is so amazing that our lives become a continuation of the great tapestry of grace and faith that God is weaving through the lives of all His children. But with this great spiritual heritage comes a burden of responsibility. For we are not only to follow in their footsteps, but we are called to light the path of faith to the generations following after us. God is still writing His story!

We need to consider our own life, and determine whether it is in keeping with our spiritual heritage. Are we being used by God to enhance our spiritual legacy, or are we in apathy or unbelief, allowing it to wither and die? If we proclaim it without living it, then our spiritual heritage has no depth. If we live it without proclaiming it, then our spiritual legacy has no voice. But if we

live it and proclaim it—if our words **and** our actions are full of faith for all to see—then we become a living, vital link in our spiritual heritage. We become a strong voice to carry on the ways and works of God to the next generation!

Proverbs 31:10–31

In the Hebrew home, Proverbs 31 is called the “*Eshet Chayil*”—woman of honor. It is a beautiful hymn, traditionally sung by the husband as a prayer before the Friday evening Shabbat meal as an expression of love and honor for his wife. This scriptural melody expressed the husband’s desire for his wife to live a purposeful life—one that would reflect her Lord. As this rich and deep prayer reached her ears at the closing of the week, it brought affirmation and inspiration to her life. The husband’s prayer joined her heart in asking God for strength and wisdom to live for His glory. Where her life matched the traits sung about in the poem, she was encouraged. In areas where she was lacking, she was exhorted. But with the singing of the poem, the family was reminded of the value and joy a godly woman can bring to their lives and to their home.

It is my hope and prayer that as we work through the truths found in Proverbs 31, we too would be both encouraged in our faith and exhorted to “*excel still more*” (1 Thessalonians 4:1). To be a woman of honor is a life-long journey. Every journey has valleys of despair, bridges to cross, hills to climb, and loads to bear. There are times when a sojourner can be so discouraged by the difficulty of the path that she is tempted to give up and quit, not willing to endure to the end. Fortunately, on this spiritual journey of feminine excellence, we have a Savior who is ready and willing to take us by the hand and lead us to the glory of virtue. We do not sojourn alone!

Proverbs 31:10–31 was originally written in the Hebrew language as an acrostic poem, meaning that each verse of the poem starts with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from *aleph* to *tav*, or as we would say in English, from A to Z.

One of the effects an acrostic poem has on its reader is to imply a comprehensive study of the subject—here, being wisdom personified as a woman. As each verse begins with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet, that letter brings a visual picture to the Hebrew reader (just as English-speaking preschoolers would learn A for apple, B for ball, and so forth). Venturing through the verses of Proverbs 31, we will learn these Hebrew letters and the symbol or picture they bring to the Hebrew mind.

For understanding's sake, we will strive to work through Proverbs 31 with the thinking of our Hebrew ancestors of the faith. Each letter and its symbol will be used to teach and illustrate a specific quality of the woman of honor. Each one will give us a visual picture to remind us of what God wants us to be, to challenge us to follow in the wisdom of our fathers and mothers in the faith, and to teach us to be a treasure that will bring praise to Him!

N.C.

Lesson One: Prosperity

*“An excellent wife, who can find?
For her worth is far above jewels.”*
Proverbs 31:10



Verse 10 of this acrostic poem starts with the Hebrew letter *aleph*. *Aleph* is the symbol of an **ox** and represents **prosperity**.

*The woman of honor is a source of prosperity
and blessing to her marriage and family.*

My husband is very kind and gracious to verbally compliment me in many ways. And fortunately for me, the older he gets, the more he excels at this chivalrous art! But if he were to come home tonight, enter the house with a smile on his face and a sparkle in his eye, sweep me up in his arms and whisper in my ear “My lady, you are such an ox,” I can tell you I wouldn’t be too impressed. I would be more inclined toward slapping him than kissing him!

In our modern society, to be called an ox is definitely not a compliment! But in the agricultural society of Bible times, an ox was a symbol of prosperity because of its strength, service, and usefulness. An ox lightened the family workload by shouldering strong burdens and making difficult tasks easier.

We recently saw this very thing in India. In this poor but emerging country, the village culture is still very similar to that of biblical times. We were near the Bay of Bengal doing children’s ministry, and it just happened to be the time of the rice harvest. The fields were full of poor farmers still working by hand to cut and dry the rice, and to separate the chaff from the grain. After so much work is done by hand under the blazing

Indian sun, some farmers get a break. Those who are blessed enough to have an ox are then able to load the heavy bags of rice onto the ox carts, jump on top of the bags and rest, as the faithful, hardworking ox carries the valuable grain to sale. Ah, what an asset an ox can be!

We have also seen the poverty that the lack of an ox can be to a family whose very existence depends on the growth of their own food. In the poor villages of Africa, we have seen men who do not own an ox—it is the wife who replaces the beast of burden and does the plowing!

After contemplating these examples, we find that the Word of God insightfully compares a virtuous woman with an ox. She serves the husband and family in such a way that the burdens of life are lightened and the family is blessed. She offers to the family relationship a prosperity greater than any savings account, real estate, or stock investment. She brings to the family the spiritual prosperity of virtue. Virtue? This is a word we seldom even hear spoken these days and a trait that is a rare commodity in our present world.

The Word “Excellent”

“An excellent wife, who can find?”

The word “*excellent*,” used in Proverbs 31:10, is the Hebrew word *chayil* and is sometimes translated “virtue,” “honor,” or “noble character.” The word refers to moral worth, ability, strength, nobility, and integrity. Perhaps the term “*excellent wife*” could best be summarized as the feminine quality of wisdom in action!

The first chapter of Genesis records the wonders of God’s creative work. At the end of each day of God’s original creation, He looked at all He had made and said, “*It is good.*” Genesis 1:31 concludes the chapter by saying, “*God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.*”

I find it very interesting that in light of the perfection of God's creation, He then turns around in Genesis 2 to see something that is not good! Genesis 2:18 says, "*It is **not good** for the man to be alone; I will make for him a helper suitable for him.*" Adam was an innocent man, living in a perfect environment of daily fellowship with the holy and righteous God of the universe. What more could he need? What more could he ask for? A woman, of course!

As Adam looked around at the male and female animals, he saw that he lacked a counterpart, a companion, a helper, and a friend. God also saw this need. God loves to fill the needs of our soul and so His hand of grace reached down to put Adam into a deep sleep and fashioned from his rib a beautiful woman. God had intimate knowledge of Adam's needs, personality, likes, and dislikes. He was willing and able to form the woman into a fitting counterpart to fill the desires of Adam's heart. I believe God designs and forms each one of us unique (and sometimes strange!) women with one man in mind.

When God "*formed ... me in my mother's womb*" (Psalm 139:13–16), I believe He was thinking of the soul of my husband. His hand of grace reached down and fashioned both my body and my soul with the **potential** to be the exact counterpart my husband needed. I am the God-created, God-fashioned and God-given suitable helper for his life. Wow! I get chills just thinking about it! Does this mean if we marry the "right man" that life and marriage will be perfect? Sorry, no! This is because both the man and the woman bring into the marriage the baggage of an old sin nature that, at times, mars God's perfection. That is exactly what should draw us to the wisdom of God's Word and the power of His love.

Proverbs 18:22 says "*he who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD ...*" This verse helps us understand that every woman starts her marriage relationship as "*a good thing*" or a gift from God to the man. Proverbs 19:14 tells us

“house and wealth are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.”

By comparing the creation of the woman with these biblical proverbs, we can come to an exciting conclusion: We are a grace-gift, formed and fashioned by a holy and omnipotent God, and delivered to our husband from His loving hand on the day of our marriage. The foundational purpose for our creation and life is to come alongside our husband and be a suitable helper for him. This is a magnificent role when you consider the only other One said to be the man’s Helper is the Lord Himself (Psalm 54:4; 46:1; John 14:16, 26).

For the man, we are the earthly helper and God is the heavenly Helper. What a team! Every woman has the opportunity to take advantage of this divine start, and continue developing into a woman of virtue and honor. We should be growing spiritually each day to become the woman God created us to be!

If you are reading these words as an older woman, you may hopelessly conclude you have already spoiled the plan God designed for you through selfishness, apathy, neglect, or sin. If so, let me ask you this question, “Did the sun come up today?” With the rising of the sun, God’s faithfulness and mercies are renewed to us each day (Lamentations 3:22–23). Each day is a new opportunity to forget what lies behind and press on to the goal of feminine virtue (Philippians 3:13).

Consider this poem, *A New Leaf*, by Kathleen Wheeler and take heart:

*He came to my desk with quivering lip;
The lesson was done.
“May I have a new sheet, dear teacher?
I’ve spoiled this one.”
So I took his sheet all spoiled and blotted,
And gave him a new one—all unspotted,
Then into his sad eyes smiled,
“Do better now, my child.”*

*I came to the Throne with quivering heart;
The old day was done.
“May I have a new day, dear Master?
I’ve spoiled this one.”
So He took my day, all spoiled and blotted,
And gave me a new one—all unspotted,
Then into my sad heart smiled,
“Do better now, My child.”*

Each day is a fresh start and a new opportunity to reflect the truths of God’s Word. He is able to forgive, cleanse, heal, and renew our inner person, our life, and our marriage. I know, because He has done it for me ... more than once!

Other Uses of the Word “Excellent,” Chayil

We find that this same word *chayil*, or “*excellent*” is used by Boaz to describe Ruth in Ruth 3:11. As Ruth had been gleaning in the fields, Boaz had the pleasure of observing the character of this poor young widow. He finds her to be hard working, compassionate, and selfless. When he wakes in the middle of the night to find Ruth laying at his feet as a symbol of her desire to be redeemed by him, Boaz verbalizes his respect for her by saying, “*I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence.*”

Another use of the word *chayil* is found in Proverbs 12:4. The verse says “*An excellent wife is the crown of her husband ...*” The crown is a symbol of status and honor to be worn for all to see. The man who is blessed with a virtuous woman has a wife that reflects the glory and character of Christ in a real and visible way.

From both of these passages, we see that excellence or virtue is not hidden. It is formed in the inner workings of a woman’s soul through the transforming power of the Word of God and the Spirit of God, and then becomes manifest in her thoughts, words, priorities, decisions, actions, and life. An excellent woman brings

glory to her earthly husband here and now, and to her heavenly Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, for all of eternity—by God’s grace, of course!

There is another use of the word *chayil* in Scripture that I find very inspiring. Often the word is used in military settings to describe a soldier who is brave, valiant, and mighty. It is used repeatedly in the Old Testament for the warriors of Israel, the “*mighty men of valor!*” (1 Samuel 9:1). Joshua 1:8 speaks of them as the ones sent over the river Jordan to capture the city of Jericho. They are described as “*mighty men*” who came to David’s aid in his many battles as “*men trained for war, who could handle shield and spear, and whose faces were like the faces of lions, and they were as swift as the gazelles on the mountains*” (1 Chronicles 12:8).

I like that the inspired Word of God uses the same Hebrew word to describe a lady filled with His wisdom and a warrior man filled with skill and strength. I think we can conclude from this that we, as women, in an appropriate and feminine way, are to be warrior maidens, fighting the battles of the Lord. We, too, should yield to the spiritual “boot camp” training that God faithfully puts us through, and come to the aid of our husbands with shield and spear in hand (“*armor of God,*” Ephesians 6:10–17), with a face set with the boldness of a lion (Proverbs 28:1), running swiftly our race of faith from the cross to the crown with eyes fixed on our hero—the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:1–3).

This book is not meant to be a discourse on spiritual warfare, but let this little word *chayil* remind us that we live every moment of every day in a fallen world ruled by a spiritual enemy. As part of the curse of Genesis 3, God put enmity between the woman and the serpent. That satanic enmity is alive and well, even thriving, on planet Earth today!

Satan vindictively targets our soul, our body, our marriage, our children, and our home for destruction. The man’s battles are generally out in the world, but the woman’s battles are typically

fought (and won or lost) within the walls of her heart, her home, and the relationships she treasures. We see this clearly in the Bible when we examine the tests, trials, and temptations that faced the women of Scripture. I find that no matter what country and culture I am in around the world—from “progressive” Western culture to remote village life—the situation is not much different today.

I have a friend named Gloria who lives in another state so I don’t see her very often. But whenever we meet after long times of separation, she makes a fist out of her hand and butts her knuckles up against mine and says, “warrior-woman”! I have great respect for the many spiritual battles she has faced with faith and wisdom. Her greeting always causes me to ask, am I “armored up” for the spiritual battles of my life? Am I truly a “warrior-woman,” or have I laid aside my spiritual weapons and resorted to apathetic retreat?

After returning with my husband from a mission trip to Zambia, I was hospitalized with malaria. We were living in Australia at the time, and the night before being released from Royal Perth Hospital, I was moved to a different room in the late evening. I shared the room with three elderly women—two of whom were peacefully sleeping and one who was painfully groaning. This very thin and frail lady kept ringing the nurse, asking for something to alleviate the extreme pain she was feeling. Finally, the nurse said there was nothing more she could do.

For quite some time, the woman kept moaning in and out of a fitful sleep until finally in the dark of night I heard her pray. Her prayer went like this, *“Dear heavenly Father, I put on the armor of God, I gird myself with truth, I put on the breastplate of righteousness and the sandals of peace. Lord, I take up the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. I am arming myself with the Sword of the Spirit. In Jesus Name, Amen.”* At the close of this humble prayer, the weak little woman was dressed in the strongest clothing known to man—the armor of God! In a moment of time, she was transformed by grace and truth from a

frail, suffering soul to a conquering soldier. And then ... she slept!

Jesus Christ has already won every spiritual victory for us, and He *“has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ”* (Ephesians 1:3). He has set us in the midst of a battle, but equipped us to fight with His armor. The armor of God is free, never needs ironing, never goes out of style, and fits any figure. It is fashionable attire for any woman of excellence. Dress in it daily, and do not let the enemy have the victory in your thoughts, your words, or your actions!

The Value of Excellence

The last part of Proverbs 31:10 says, *“For her worth is far above jewels.”* At the end of Proverbs 31, the poem talks about the husband and children giving the woman praises. But in this verse, we see God’s evaluation of the virtuous woman. As mentioned in the introduction, the Lord of Heaven and Earth has placed a divine price tag on an excellent woman; her soul is so valuable to Jesus that He was willing to redeem it through His very own blood.

Her life of service is also valuable in His sight as He says her worth is *“far above jewels!”* A jewel has an intrinsic beauty and worth regardless of where it is found, regardless of who does or doesn’t value it. If a jewel is found in the setting of a beautiful gold ring, it is precious and valuable. If a jewel is found lying in the dirt and dung of a barnyard, it still retains its beauty and value. Ladies, if you are married to an unbelieving husband or an undiscerning husband who does not appreciate the virtues of faith and service in your life, take courage from this principle. Your value lies not in a man’s appreciation of you, but in God’s evaluation of you! Jesus Christ paid for you with His own precious life, to redeem you for His glory (1 Corinthians 6:20)!

As women, we are used to looking at price tags, right? If we are shopping for clothes and find something on the rack we like, the next thing we do is look at the price tag and consider if the item is worth the asking price. Consider and meditate on the divine price tag of your life. We can only be redeemed into the family of God through the precious blood of His One and only Son—the Lord Jesus Christ. He thought your life was worth the asking price, and He willingly paid that price on the cross of Calvary. But there is more to consider. For the woman who seeks to live her life in the wisdom God provides, there is another side to the divine price tag of her life. The Lord says her worth is far more valuable than a treasure chest full of precious jewels. What a humbling thought!

A jewel is made even more beautiful by refining and polishing. Before my husband and I were married, he had a piece of raw gold that he had brought home from a mission trip into the jungles of Brazil. This raw gold wasn't very pretty until he took it to a goldsmith who "turned up the heat" on the gold, refined it, polished it, and fashioned it into a beautiful wedding ring! Now I think it's the most gorgeous piece of gold in the world!

So it is with our life. As God purposely takes us through suffering and trials, our faith is refined (1 Peter 1:6–7). Refined faith in a woman becomes radiant inner beauty that defies gravity and time. No high-priced beauty therapy, creams or serums can even come close to that!

As we have already seen, the Book of Proverbs starts with the challenge to seek after wisdom. Proverbs 1:6 says, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.*" All throughout the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is referred to as "*she.*" Proverbs ends by saying the "*woman who fears the LORD shall be praised*" (Proverbs 31:30). This principle is elaborated by comparing the value of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10 with the value of wisdom in Proverbs 3:13–18 and Proverbs 8:11.

When Jesus was alive and ministering on the Earth, He told the disciples that many would follow the broad path that “*leads to destruction,*” but few would find the narrow path to eternal life (Matthew 7:13–14). Proverbs 31:10 implies a similar principle. Many women will follow the broad path of conformity to this world, but few will choose the narrow path of applying the wisdom of God’s Word to life. Few women in this life will attain the spiritual “status” of honor, excellence, and virtue, but those who do, will be more precious in the sight of God than all the jewels of this world!

The opportunity to have this value in God’s sight is available to each and every one of us because we have the wisdom of God’s Word and the working of the Holy Spirit in our life. God has provided the assets we need. Each of us must daily choose how we use those grace assets. Let us, as women of God, choose the narrow path and reflect the light of Jesus Christ. Let us never assume we have attained this goal, nor get discouraged that we will never attain it. Rather, by God’s grace, let us commit to a moment-by-moment striving for the goal of excellence. If we are like an “ox” for our husband and family, we will shine like a finely cut diamond for Jesus—reflecting His light with a rare and radiant beauty!

Lesson Two: Refuge

“The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.”

Proverbs 31:11



Verse 11 starts with the Hebrew letter *beth*. *Beth* is the symbol of a **house** and represents **security** and **refuge**.

The woman of honor ministers to the needs of her husband's soul.

In the Bible, “*the heart*” is referred to as the core of our being, the place of our deep innermost feelings where we love, feel, and communicate. The word “*trust*” used in this verse is the Hebrew word *batach*. It means “to place confidence in, to be secure and sure.” The woman of honor has a special place at the core of her husband’s heart. He is secure in the relationship and finds her a place of refuge and comfort. He is comfortable and “at home” with her regardless of where they are.

Because my husband and I are involved in a lot of overseas mission work, we aren’t home very much. We sleep on airplanes, on the ground, in bamboo houses, mud huts, ratty hotels and, occasionally, nice hotels. We can adapt to our surroundings no matter where we are. But I just can’t describe to you the pleasure and contentment we feel when we return to our own home, sit on our own back porch, and climb into our own comfy bed after a long, grueling trip. This pleasure, comfort, and intimacy describe the condition of a man’s heart when he is with the wife he trusts.

“And he will have no lack of gain.”

No matter what the financial state of the home, the husband of an honorable woman has no lack because he is secure in the marital

relationship. If there is a problem or lack, but there is someone to share it with, the problem or lack becomes slight in comparison (Ecclesiastes 4:12, “*a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart*”).

In the Garden of Eden, “*the man and his wife were both naked and were unashamed*” (Genesis 2:25). Genesis 2 ends with this beautiful description of the transparent relationship the first man and woman enjoyed in the Garden. And then ... in slithered the serpent! Satan immediately attacked the joy and harmony of the first marriage with temptation toward sin. His evil desire was to create one barrier between the man and the woman, and then another barrier between them and God. He succeeded with Adam and Eve, and he has succeeded in many marriages since. The devil loves to tear down, cheapen, and destroy Christian marriages.

The transparent relationship that Adam and Eve enjoyed should be the goal of every marriage. To daily live and communicate with the one you love with an open and exposed soul, and yet be unashamed, is a goal worthy of attention. Notice that as soon as the man and woman sinned through disobedience to God, this open, unashamed harmony quickly vanished. They became ashamed and afraid and tried to cast the blame away from themselves onto the other. Blame and shame have no place in a Christ-centered marriage. These mental-attitude sins destroy openness, confidence, and harmony within a marriage relationship—or within any relationship for that matter.

In order to fulfill the challenge of Proverbs 31:11, I think it’s important to understand some things about the workings of a man’s soul and the unique needs that he has. Of course, every man’s soul is different from the next, but there are also some similarities. We will examine this in three parts:

1. understanding his need for respect,
2. understanding his old sin nature, and
3. understanding his masculinity.

Understanding His Need for Respect

In Ephesians 5:25–33, Paul spends nine verses instructing husbands to love their wives in the same tender way that Christ loves the Church—in the same personal way that he loves his own body. As women, we all crave such love from our husbands.

A man also craves after something in his soul, but it is not love he craves as much as respect. And so, Paul concludes these nine verses to the husband with one short but powerful command to the woman, “*and let the wife see to it that she **respect** her husband*” (Ephesians 5:33).

Take a good look at this passage, and you will see that the command given to the woman is an unconditional command. Paul does not say, “**If** your husband loves you like Christ loves the Church **then** you should give due respect.” No, the command given to the woman is not based on any conditions, just as the command to the man is not based on any conditions.

When my husband and I were first married, he would often compliment me on being a good woman. That was nice, but I longed to hear the words “I love you.” I would often say to him, “I love you,” but what he longed to hear spoken out of my heart and from my lips were words of respect. The heart and soul of a man differs from that of a woman. And so, a wise woman will learn to minister to the needs of her own man’s heart.

With the man’s need for respect in mind, let’s look at one of my favorite “marriage” proverbs, Proverbs 12:4a:

“An excellent wife is the crown of her husband ...”

This proverb visualizes for us the value of an excellent woman. She is the crown on her husband’s head. This crown is visible proof that he is the “king of the house,” receiving his due honor and respect, and she is his queen! The contrast to this is given in

the second part of that proverb, “... *but she who shames him is as rottenness to his bones.*”

Think about what role the bones play in a man’s body. Bones are the supporting structure of the body, giving the man form, stature, and strength. If the woman stoops to shaming her husband (the opposite of respect), she is not his queen but his cancer! Someone in the medical field has told me that bone cancer is one of the most painful forms of this disease. Respect from the woman is what a man needs in his soul for him to stand tall and strong in his walk on this earth.

I like to summarize this proverb with a visual exercise. Think of yourself in your bedroom—the most private and intimate room in your home. If you are giving your husband the respect that his soul needs, then picture yourself sitting on a royal throne, dressed in a beautiful gown, accessorized with jewels and crown—the fragrance of costly perfume filling the room. You are his queen. But if you withhold respect and shovel out shame to your husband, then picture yourself lying in a hospital bed, dressed in a drab hospital gown, accessorized with IVs and tubes—the smell of rotten flesh filling the room. You are his cancer. The choice is clear: we can be either queen or cancer!

When teaching on the need for respect in a marriage relationship, resentment often arises. Fair enough. There are many husbands who, from a human standpoint, don’t deserve respect. Do it anyway. (As my son-in-law is fond of saying, “Suck it up, princess!”) This is one of the times in our Christian life when we have to take the Word of God and obey it because it **is** the Word of God and has authority and power in our life!

Humble yourself before the Lord and ask Him to give you grace and strength to respect the position your husband has in your life, and express that respect, regardless of whether or not he deserves it. In doing so, you are respecting the commands of God’s Word and the position of authority your heavenly Husband, Jesus Christ, has in your life. God blesses obedience to His Word.

In the story of David and Michal, we find the danger of allowing a disrespectful attitude to simmer in your soul and then boil over into cutting words. The result is bitterness, loss of intimacy, and a breakdown of what God intended a marriage to be.

David and Michal began their relationship with love. Michal's father, King Saul, asked of David a bride-price of 100 Philistine foreskins. In true heroic style, the young, handsome warrior purchased his lovely bride with twice the amount asked. He presented himself before King Saul with 200 Philistine foreskins, winning his love's hand in marriage. This further increased Saul's raging jealousy against David.

When Saul threatened David's life, Michal acted quickly and thoughtfully to save David from her father's evil plot. But her actions estranged her from her father and probably, out of revenge, Saul took Michal from David and gave her to Paltiel to be his wife. In time, David found Michal and stole her out of Paltiel's hands to regain her as **his** wife. Apparently, Michal had grown to love her second husband and resented her return to David's palace.

In the meantime, David had married six other women so that Michal felt anything but special. Michal certainly had a rocky life! Her downfall came in not trusting God with the changing circumstances of her life. This gave seed to a root of bitterness in her soul. Remember, our circumstances are beyond our control, but how we deal with them is not. God is much more interested in changing our character than our circumstances. Michal allowed pain and bitterness to become the core emotions of her heart and, in time, they overflowed to create impenetrable barriers between her and the chivalrous man she once loved (1 Samuel 18:20; 19:11–17; 2 Samuel 3:13–16). This is all background for the part of David and Michal's story we want to examine (2 Samuel 6:12–23). In this passage, David is returning the Ark of God to the City of Jerusalem. David, because of his spiritual focus, is very excited about the Ark coming back to Jerusalem. Second Samuel 6:14 tells us "*And*

David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, and David was wearing a linen ephod.”

Some people think this means he was dancing about in his underclothes, but the linen ephod was simply a short-sleeved, priestly garment worn at times of offering and celebration. David wore it to honor the Lord in his priestly activities of the day. It was an act of humility to lay aside his kingly robes and dress himself as a humble servant of God. David is dancing in celebration of a joyous and special day in Israel. He desires the jubilation of this day to reach all the people of the kingdom, and so he blesses them with the distribution of cakes of bread, dates, and raisins.

When David returns home to bless his own household, he finds that Michal is the only one in Israel not celebrating with him. Instead, the well of bitterness she has been storing up is gushing out in anger. Her words portray her attitude, for in 2 Samuel 6:20, she mocks David’s celebration (the opposite of respect) with these words, *“How the king of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself today in the eyes of his servants’ maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!”*

Michal is offended because she thinks David did not act in a manner befitting a king. She accuses him of dancing only for the pleasure of the women rather than before the Lord. David truthfully defends his actions by saying he was celebrating before the Lord.

This ugly confrontation created a barrier between David and Michal that never toppled. Second Samuel 6:23 tells us *“Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.”* She finishes out the days of her life as a bitter and barren woman. It is unclear if her barrenness is discipline from the Lord or, if possibly, David lost his desire for Michal, resulting in a sexually abstinent marriage.

Either way, Michal shows us the dangerous consequences of mental-attitude sins. Sins that originate in the mind, and are allowed to take root and develop there, don't remain mental-attitude sins for long. Inevitably, they vomit out of the soul through hurtful words and actions—most often falling on those we love. Sin that is not dealt with through confession, cleansing, and correction can be the death of any love relationship.

I would encourage you, as ladies, to be aware of the pitfall of bitterness into which Michal fell. It is a pitfall that Satan would like to dig for each one of us. Several times in my life, I have found myself struggling to spiritually climb out of such a murky pit.

Keep a short reign on your thoughts and emotions. Pray, and ask God to make you aware of thoughts and emotions that are sinful and detrimental to fellowship with Him and with your husband. As soon as a sinful thought is identified, it must be confessed (1 John 1:9) and dealt with quickly through prayer and the application of God's Word. We will look further at this process later in the book.

Another frequent sin that displays a disrespectful attitude toward your husband is gossip. Gossip is listed in the Bible along with such sins as "*hating God*" and "*inventing evil.*" James 3:5 says, "*the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!*"

Gossip, in any setting, can start a fire that is nearly unquenchable and leaves behind the charred ashes of destroyed trust, hurt feelings, and wounded relationships. Women seem to be very susceptible to the sin of gossip. It is especially dangerous when we gossip concerning our own husbands. Intimate trust and communication cannot be maintained in a marriage if the wife is telling the secrets of her husband's life and soul to the world—or just to the woman next door!

If we want the statement of Proverbs 31:11 to be true about us, *“the heart of her husband trusts in her,”* then we must be careful to guard our tongue from sharing with others the verbal and overt intimacies of our marital relationship. We must refrain from the need to run to another for comfort every time our husband hurts us or fails us in some way. We have a heavenly Father who is always waiting with open ears and loving arms to hear our hurts and griefs through prayer. Use Him as your sounding board and keep private things private.

Certainly, there may arise a time in marriage when wise counsel needs to be sought. This is understandable. Use caution in doing so by seeking counsel with a spiritually mature Christian who will give Christ-centered advice and can be trusted to keep things confidential.

I have an older friend named Nadine. What I so admire about this woman is the way she constantly lifts up her husband’s character and verbally expresses her love and respect for him. It isn’t done in a shallow, fake, or patronizing way, but done in genuine, humble appreciation for her man! Sometimes when he does something especially sweet she will say, *“Oh, Ger, I’m falling in love all over again!”* And this from a woman in her seventies. I love it!

For those of us who are raising daughters in the home, consider how her eyes and ears follow what you do and say. You are training her for life as a wife. Are you training her to talk behind her husband’s back, or training her to verbally give respect and honor?

Understanding His Old Sin Nature

The above statement might seem like a contradiction of terms, for the Bible says:

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Jeremiah 17:9

This statement holds true for every man and woman who ever lived, with one exception—the Lord Jesus Christ. In the daily, 24/7 routine of marriage, the old sin nature (or the “*old man*,” Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9, NKJV) crops up and, at times, takes root and thrives. The more it is fed and watered by the lusts of this world, the harder it is to deal with. When this happens, the person living in close intimacy with a thriving old sin nature has a lot of hardship to deal with. (When the sin nature is cruisin’ there’s gonna be some bruisin’!) In another section of this study, we will deal with our own old sin nature, but in this section let’s try to find some insight into our husband’s old sin nature.

1. Every person’s old sin nature is unique.

Chances are, before you married your husband, you had already been exposed to some traits of his sin nature. Once married, however, the evidence of it is going to be glaring—just as your old sin nature will be glaring back at him! Study the temptations and weaknesses of your husband’s soul so that you can identify when he is empowered by the old sin nature and when he is empowered by the Spirit of God. If you do this, you will seldom have to ask yourself, “Why is he acting this way?” The answer will be easy: the fuel running his thoughts, words, and/or actions is not from God, but from the old man within.

This makes it easier to not take things so personally and read into his words or actions more than you should. When the “*old man*” is controlling his life, it’s a good time to pray for him to have the grace and humility to turn back to God in confession and correction. Pray for him to be delivered from temptation since you are going to understand his temptations more than anyone else.

When our husbands are not walking in fellowship with God, it is easy for us to react to their sin with our own sin—perhaps one of judgment, anger, or self-pity. This

only multiplies the problem and the consequences of sin in the home. The higher road to take is one of remaining in fellowship with God, so that you can be a source of strength and right thinking, to bring him back to a place of fellowship with God.

This principle applies in situations both big and small, whether it be something as horrific as unfaithfulness in the marriage or something as small as outrage at a stop light. It is interesting to do a study of Abraham and Sarah and see how often, when he was out of line, she remained under the umbrella of God's protection, giving him motivation to return to right thinking and behavior. And Abraham often did the same for Sarah. This is how it should be in a marriage.

2. The old sin nature cannot be satisfied.

This is an important principle to remember in marriage. The very nature of the "*old man*" is one of lust and implacability—it cannot be satisfied! Why is it important to understand the implacability of the sin nature? Because many a man has fallen into a trend of immorality in their life, leading to addictions like pornography, adultery, and other sexual sins. This leaves a wife feeling degraded and desperate to somehow turn his sexual attention to her rather than others. She beats herself up trying to be what he wants, not understanding that no one—including herself—can satisfy the lusts of his sin nature. She thinks if she could be prettier, slimmer, sexier, or "good enough," he would turn from his sin and addiction. Certainly, we should do all we can to be sexually attractive and pleasing to our husbands. But to take on self-guilt for his addictions is a burden God does not intend for us to bear.

This is true in the area of sexual sins, as well as other areas. Frustration and discontent in a man's soul will affect the home and every relationship in it. Soul-peace

cannot be found when a husband is being ruled by the “old man”; the sin nature is a grouchy old thing that cannot and will not be satisfied! As Oswald Chambers said, “*There is only One Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ*” (*My Utmost for His Highest*). Understanding this will free you up in a multitude of ways.

Understanding His Masculinity

Guys and girls are different! Praise God! Some of our grandchildren live in Australia. One time, when we were visiting in Sydney, our granddaughter was about three years old, and it was during the time when the Disney *Cars* movie had just come out. She had a collection of little cars, and she would play with them by putting them in a straight line, then rearranging them, then putting them in a circle and so forth. She loved that little set of cars and knew the name of every one of them; but she never really drove them, she just arranged them!

A few years later, we were visiting again and her little brother was now about three, and he loved playing with the same set of Disney cars. He rammed them into each other, plunged them into his oatmeal, drove them off the table and used them to create all kinds of noise, chaos, and little-boy fun! Well, in some ways, little boys never grow up!

The world today is rudely intent on trying to emasculate our men. This is disgusting! We need our men to be men. We need them to be masculine men, strong men—men that provide for us, protect us, lead us, and love us. This may seem old fashioned to some of you reading this, and it may not be politically or socially correct in today’s culture, but I will go to my death believing it is the biblical truth!

I am disgusted by the present-day TV commercials and sitcoms where the woman is always the “clued in” one and the man is

laying around in pink pajamas cuddling a kitty cat. We must be careful not to join the world in its intent to kick our men in the “balls” and turn them into weak-kneed males. Apparently, the country singer, Brad Paisley, agrees with this viewpoint as expressed in his song, *I’m Still a Guy*:

*These days there's dudes getting facials,
Manicured, waxed and botoxed.
With deep spray-on tans and creamy lotion-y hands,
You can't grip a tackle box.*

*With all of these men lining up to get neutered;
It's hip now to be feminized.
I don't highlight my hair;
I've still got a pair;
Yeah, honey, I'm still a guy.*

To a woman, testosterone does weird things. Sometimes the woman’s hormones and the man’s hormones come together, and there are wonderful fireworks. That’s when we appreciate the man’s testosterone. Oh, yeah! At other times, the woman’s hormones and the man’s hormones clash, because estrogen and testosterone just don’t think alike.

God has designed marriage to be a joining of two very different creatures into a bond that only the love of Christ can build. If you struggle with some areas of his masculinity, I would encourage you to quit fighting it and embrace it. A woman’s feminine nature is best able to grow and bloom when she is under the care and protection of strong male leadership. God has made your husband to lead—let him lead. God has designed your husband to be the protector—encourage that protection. God has designed your husband to provide for you—appreciate his provision.

Along with those areas of God’s design comes a soul that needs freedom, open spaces, and the smell of wood smoke. He needs to build, fix, sweat, and flex in front of the mirror, and he doesn’t like shopping for earrings. He’s a guy; he’s not your girlfriend!

In addition, he seems to have a weird attraction to gross bodily noises. I know it's hard to understand, but deal with it. And this is just a small list of what a feminine heart might consider strange behavior. We will never totally understand the intricacies of their mind: how they think, deal with problems, and look at life (nor will they understand ours); but we can understand that in God's divine design, we need to let him play the part and applaud loudly when he does. He has made your man to be **the** man!

And for those of you who may be raising sons, please take this section to heart in your role as a mother. Boys need to stomp in the mud, play with sticks, and bite their Pop Tarts® into the shape of a pistol. Raise your son to be a man, a defender, a leader, and a winner. Just because his role-play includes blowing things up, it doesn't mean he is going to grow into a terrorist. Prepare him for life as a warrior—not a wimp. Let's work on being biblically correct—not politically correct!

Of course, all of these strong traits should be tempered by the strongest masculine trait of all—self-control that leads to gentlemanly behavior. We always instructed our four boys to treat their sister and other girls like fine china, not Tupperware. I am very fond of the saying, "*There is nothing as strong as true gentleness, and nothing as gentle as true strength*" (Saint Francis de Sales). Those characteristics were perfectly balanced in the Person of Jesus Christ. We should encourage that balance in our husbands and in our sons!

Building Barriers, Building Bridges

From Proverbs 31:11, we see the challenge to develop and maintain a relationship that is open, honest, safe, secure, and stimulating. This results in a home that is a true refuge, where both man and wife feel loved, comforted, sheltered, and free to communicate. To quote from a friend of ours, "*Commitment holds a relationship together, but communication gives it life.*" Communication can only be free and honest when sin and shame are absent. There is no lack in this kind of relationship because

the needs are fulfilled, the burdens shared, and the **heart** is at home.

Proverbs 24:3–4 says *“By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.”* I think we all desire to have understanding as the foundation of our life and have the *“rooms [of our life] filled with ... precious and pleasant riches.”*

Take some time to look at the following list of verses. The column on the left lists mental-attitude sins, words and emotions that often cause barriers between a man and his wife. But the column on the right gives attitudes that tear down those barriers and build bridges that enrich a love relationship. Look up and examine these verses on your own.

BARRIERS	BRIDGES
Deception	Truth Ephesians 4:15, 25; Psalm 15:2; John 8:32
Bitterness	Forgiveness Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13
Anger, Wrath	Love Ephesians 4:26–27; Proverbs 15:1
Apathy toward your husband	Interest, Attention Romans 12:10–11, 15
Rebellion	Submission Ephesians 5:21–22; Romans 14:19
Criticism	Encouragement, Edification Ephesians 4:29; Romans 14:19
Jealousy	Trust 1 Corinthians 13:4–5; Proverbs 3:5
Judging	Respect, Humility Matthew 7:1–5; Romans 14:1–12; Lamentations 3:39; Ephesians 5:33
Taking your husband for granted	Thankfulness Colossians 3:15–17

BARRIERS	BRIDGES
Failure, Sin	Restoration, Forbearance Colossians 3:13; Galatians 6:1–4; Proverbs 17:9
Rejection	Acceptance Romans 15:7
Complaining	Contentment, Rejoicing Philippians 4:4, 11–13; Proverbs 19:13; 21:19; 25:25

Carefully and prayerfully consider sinful thoughts and attitudes that may need to be confessed and corrected. The application of these truths might help you destroy barriers in your relationship with your husband and build the bridges of open and unashamed love.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
John 13:34–35

It is tempting to look at the above list and think, “If only my husband would read these verses and act in such a loving and Christ-like way, then our marriage would be different.” Let me encourage you: step up to the plate and be the first to change. (If nothing changes, then nothing changes.) Focus on how these principles apply to your own life and let the Spirit of God deal with your husband. You can’t change him, but you can change yourself.

It is blasphemous for us, as women, to think we are the ones responsible to facilitate change in our husbands. That responsibility belongs only to God. He can and will do a much better job of it than we ever could. Simply pray, wait (that takes divine patience), and watch God work.

When marital barriers are toppled and overcome through understanding and faith in God's Word, the bond between a man and woman is strengthened. The barrier becomes a building block (or a "bridge") as we prove the promise of Romans 8:28, *"that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*

We have greater appreciation and commitment to our partner when we have been able to make it through the hard times together and know the victory of overcoming by faith. Then, and only then, our boasting can be in the Lord, and we can declare to each other, to our children, and to the world that God's grace is greater than all our sin. I believe God intends us all to have a victory song of His grace in our life. This song can only be sung when we overcome in faith!

You may be discouraged over barriers in your marriage relationship, or feel there are problems that cannot be overcome. The Word of God assures us that Christ is able to take a hardened and cold relationship and make something new and living out of it when two people are willing to come to Him and His Word for deliverance. Ezekiel 11:19–20 teaches us that God is able to turn a *"heart of stone"* into *"a heart of flesh."* I can tell you with great joy that He has done it for my husband and me, and He can do it for you, too!

Sometimes in a marriage relationship, there are sensitive and unapproachable areas. Romans 12:18 says, *"if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."* If we dwell on these sensitive issues, it can rob our marriage of love and joy. At certain times and in certain areas, we may have to "agree to disagree." If that is the case, do so without judgment toward one another. We must respect our husband's position, decision, and/or opinion.

Try to isolate the problem from your relationship so that it doesn't flow over into other areas of your life together. Then commit it to God in prayer, ask for His Spirit to give under-

standing and correction to either you or your husband—or possibly both of you. Finally, wait patiently with an attitude of love for the barrier to be brought down. God will work in His time and in His way. He isn't finished with you or your husband yet. He is faithful!

“To sum up, let all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.”

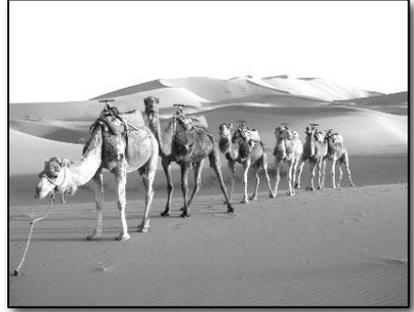
1 Peter 3:8–9

Let us strive, through the power of God's Spirit, to reflect the love of Christ in such a way that we are a place of peace and refuge for our husband—a place where he lacks no good thing, a place where his heart is comfortable and at home!

Lesson Three: Growth

*“She does him good and not evil
all the days of her life.”*

Proverbs 31:12



Verse 12 begins with the Hebrew letter *gimel*. *Gimel* is the symbol of a **camel** and pictures **supply, travel, and knowledge**.

*The woman of honor invests her
life in growth and maturity.*

In ancient civilization, the camel was the supply line from one region or country to another. When a caravan of camels would arrive from a foreign land, there would be excitement and anticipation. The arrival of the caravan meant new and exciting things to see, necessary items supplied, and news of foreign lands to be shared. A wise trader would be aware of the specific needs of that area or else his goods were not sought after. The trader would use “unveiling” tactics to reveal his goods, beginning with the ordinary and progressing to items of greater rarity and value. This would entice the purchasers’ interests in the treasures for sale. Therefore, the camel was a source of supply, interest, excitement, and knowledge.

One of the great thieves of passion in a marriage is routine. Life between a man and a woman can sometimes turn into the “same old, same old.” With the use of the *gimel* letter in this verse, we are challenged as women to be creative creatures in order to bring sparkle and shine into the marriage union. This passion for life must begin in our own soul through seeking after growth and maturity in such a way that we can continually benefit our husband and children.

In addition, we must be discerning of their constantly changing needs in order to supply accordingly. If the camel caravan unveiled the same-old products and told the same-old news every time they arrived, the excitement and anticipation would soon grow cold. So it is in our marriage. If we don't bring interest, growth, change, and creativity to the marriage, the result can be a cooling off of passion, commitment, and love. Who wants a boring marriage?

As believers in Jesus Christ, it is of utmost importance to maintain growth and renewal in our spirit. Our spiritual life is reflected in and overflows to every area of our life, including our home and marriage. If we fail to grow in our understanding of the Word, if we allow our personal love for our Savior to grow cold, then our spiritual life becomes stagnant. A river that is constantly nourished by fresh rainwater and flows quickly to the sea is a river that is full of refreshment and life. But, like the Dead Sea, a body of water without renewal becomes stagnant, useless, and even offensive. So it is with our life.

The Bible encourages us to daily renew our minds through the study of God's Word and the leadership of His Spirit, who brings about spiritual growth and change in our life. God gives us a way out of the soul-bogs and sin-ruts of life. Let's look at what the Word of God has to say about the "*renewing of [our] mind,*" Romans 12:2.

Renewing the Mind: The Motivation

One of my favorite Scriptures is Romans 12:1–2, which encourages us to transform our lives daily through the renewing of the mind:

*"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. **And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by***

the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

There are many foundational doctrines of the Christian life found in the Book of Romans. Chapter 12 starts off the application section of Romans (Romans 12–16) with the word “*therefore.*” Because of the riches of His wisdom and knowledge, and the unsearchable nature of His judgments and ways (Romans 11:33–36), Paul commands us to daily present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, and to be transformed (a process of change from the inside out) from the thinking of the world by the renewing of the mind. Without this process, we cannot properly apply the Word of God in our life.

The result of this transformation process is the promise that our lives will display the “*good and acceptable*” will of God. Jesus Himself came to this earth to carry out the perfect will of God—even to the point of being a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It should also be the desire of our heart to carry out His perfect will in our daily life.

Renewing the Mind: The Method

The method for renewing the mind is found in Ephesians 4:22–24, “*that in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.*”

In Ephesians 4, Paul exhorts believers to forsake their former manner of life (living like the Gentiles) and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. The unbelieving heart has no escape from the slavery and misery of sin. But, as a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, we have the means of being delivered from the misery of self to walk in newness of life. Oh, that we would use this grace method more often!

Ephesians 4:22–24 gives a three-step process for renewing the mind in terms similar to taking a bath. Picture yourself coming in from a long day of working in the garden: sweaty, dirty, clothes covered with fertilizer, and in need of refreshment. First, you take off your dirty clothes, you bathe, and then put on a fresh set of clothes. It’s a simple process we have all done hundreds of times. What we do as a daily process of care for our body, we should also do as a daily process of care for our soul:

- **Step 1.** Ephesians 4:22 tells us to “*lay aside the old self.*” The old self is corrupt with sin and yet we so often clothe our soul in this filth through disobedience to God’s Word. The first step is to take off the old filthy clothes through confession of sin (1 John 1:9).
- **Step 2.** Ephesians 4:23 tells us to “*be renewed in the spirit of [our] mind.*” God is the One who does the renewal for us (to restore to freshness, vigor, perfection) through the cleansing of our heart. He is the only one who can bathe our soul for the removal of sin.
- **Step 3.** Ephesians 4:24 gives us the last step and that is to “*put on the new self,*” like putting on a fresh set of clean clothes after a bath. It is not only necessary to get rid of the sin in our heart through **confession** and **cleansing**, but this should be followed by **correction**. A soul-decision must be made to replace our previous thoughts, words, or actions with behavior fitting a child of God.

Ephesians 4:25–32 illustrates this renewing process for us by giving one example after another of putting off the old self and putting on the new. Paul tells us to forsake lies and speak the truth, to forsake stealing in order to share, to forsake words of discouragement in order to encourage, to forsake emotional sins in order to display the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. The pattern is very clear: forsake the carnal and turn to the spiritual (*cf.*, Colossians 3:5–11).

Read these verses for yourself so that this process is better understood and utilized in your spiritual life.

Renewing the Mind: The Example

Psalm 51 is a confession psalm written by David after his sin with Bathsheba. It gives us a great example of how to deal with sin in our life through confession, cleansing, and correction. His prayer is humble and honest, spoken from the broken spirit of a “*man after [God’s] own heart,*” 1 Samuel 13:14.

In Psalm 51:4, David confesses his sin to God by saying, “*Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.*” He acknowledges that cleansing is from God in Psalm 51:7, “*Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*” David understands that his need goes further, for he desires not just cleansing in his life, but the grace to correct his life and be useful in God’s plan once again. Therefore, in Psalm 51:10, he prays, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, **and renew** a steadfast spirit within me.*” A steadfast spirit is a spirit of faith, resolve, and endurance. David wants to be delivered from the filth of past sin and the possibility of future sin.

As we grow older and we see our external beauty fading (or fleeting!), it should not be a cause for disappointment, as time that decays the body also gives us opportunity to be renewed and strengthened in the “*inner man.*” Peter encourages us, as women, to seek after inner beauty that is imperishable and precious in the sight of God. The renewing process taught in Scripture is like exfoliation for the soul; it is the best cosmetic known to woman!

We also find in Scripture that suffering is part of the renewing process as it loosens our grip on this world and causes us to seek after that which is eternal:

*“Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, **yet our inner man is being renewed** day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look*

not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:16–18

From these verses we can describe the “*renewing of [the] mind*” in these simple but powerful daily disciplines:

- **Daily** practice confession of mental-attitude, verbal, and overt sins. God is then faithful to cleanse our soul “*from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9).
- **Daily** present yourself in sacrifice and service to God (Romans 12:1–2).
- **Daily** learn of Jesus Christ through the written Word of God. This requires a regular quiet time—reading the Bible and praying for God’s Spirit to teach you through it (Matthew 4:4).
- **Daily** seek to live in obedience to God’s Word, reflecting the Person of Jesus Christ in what you think, say, and do (Ephesians 5:1).
- **Daily** submit to suffering and testing situations, willingly and joyfully, knowing that they refine your faith and teach you dependence on God (James 1:2–4).
- **Daily** live with a divine and eternal perspective, knowing that you are seated in the heavenlies with Christ (Colossians 3:1–3).

We have a promise that comes with the “*renewing of [the] mind*” found in Isaiah 40:28–31. It is a popular passage of Scripture that encourages us to exchange our strength with the renewed strength that comes from God, as seen in verse 31:

*“Yet those who wait for the LORD will **gain new strength**; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary!”*

Isn't it wonderful that we have a way to live beyond the circumstances and pressures of life—a way to be delivered from the burdensome attitudes that mount up in our mind and rob us of peace? We have a Lord who is willing to exchange our weakness for His strength.

When a man and woman are growing in the Lord, they regularly have new and exciting things to share with each other, and they can fellowship and grow together in their walk with the Lord. Since they are renewing their own soul, the marriage will constantly be renewed as well and will not suffer the effects of a stagnant life.

Let's consider some practical applications of bringing the "camel" principle into our home so that we can be "full of surprises."

Consider the meals you fix, your dress and appearance, the way you decorate your home. Maybe it's time for some change and variety in these routine areas of your life. And what about you as a person? It is good for a woman to be gaining skills and talents, to be growing and learning throughout her life. Perhaps some courses, training, or new challenges would help you to be a more interesting and vibrant person, and unveil some abilities you didn't even know you had.

Even activities with our husband can become routine, try some new ideas for recreation, entertainment, conversation, even love-making. There is nothing sadder than a woman who does whatever it takes to get a man, and once she has a ring on her finger, she sits on the couch and "molds." Keep growing, keep developing, and keep "unveiling" to your husband the depths and treasures of your God-formed soul!

Now let's get back to Proverbs 31:12. The verse starts with "*she does him good and not evil.*" The "*good*" here is practical or economic benefit, wisdom, esthetic, or sensual good. The word for "*evil*" is interesting because it doesn't imply horrible areas of

sin but the “inability to come up to good standards that will benefit.” It also implies a “negative inner attitude toward God or man.” The virtuous woman benefits her husband spiritually, practically, economically, and sensually, as she maintains a positive attitude toward God and her husband. And when does she do this? “*All the days of her life.*” This indicates a good and consistent use of time so that her days, her years, and her life are profitable to her, to her husband, and to her Lord.

Time is one of the grace gifts that God daily gives to His children. And with the giving of time comes every provision we need to use that time wisely.

Let’s look at God’s provision of time:

- **Each day is a gift from God.** “*This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it,*” Psalm 118:24.
- **The Lord faithfully renews His grace to us each day.** Each day, we start with a fresh supply of the love and faithfulness of God. The early morning rise of the sun is more than just a beautiful sight, it is a colorful shout from the Lord reminding us of His faithfulness—all bright and new! “*The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness,*” Lamentations 3:22–23.
- **Each day, God supplies our needs according to His will** (the manna was supplied daily, Exodus 16:35). “*Give us this day our daily bread,*” Matthew 6:11.
- **God daily bears our burdens.** “*Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burden, the God who is our salvation,*” Psalm 68:19.

God is gracious to supply us with time to fulfill His plan for our life, but there are also problems that come with time. No matter

how long we live, time is short and unpredictable. Proverbs 27:1 tells us, “*do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.*” We can only count on today. James 4:14 expounds this principle, “*Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.*” Since time is so short, it is all the more necessary that we use it properly—time is not something to be wasted!

One of the challenges of our Christian life is the proper use of our time. Each day should start with the prayer, “Father, guide me to do your will **today**.” The world has all sorts of ways to distract us and consume our time so that it is wasted and gone. The Bible teaches us to “[redeem our] *time, because the days are evil*” (Ephesians 5:16). The word for “redeem” (NKJV) means “to purchase,” or “to rescue from loss.”

Henry David Thoreau said, “*As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.*” Redeeming time is to buy it up for eternity through the power of the Holy Spirit in our life. Eternity will reveal if we have wasted the precious moments, hours, and days of our lives, or if we invested them in worship, obedience, and service to God.

There are many passages in Scripture that instruct us on how to daily redeem the time:

- **We should start with rejoicing in each new day.** “*This is the day which the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,*” Psalm 118:24.
- **Each day we must decide to live for self or live in service to God.** “*If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross **daily and follow Me,***” Luke 9:23.
- **Therefore, we must learn to live one day at a time.** Oftentimes, we lose the value of today because we are

regretting yesterday or fearing tomorrow. We can learn from the victories or failures of yesterday, but we mustn't dwell on them, for they are gone. *“Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,”* Philippians 3:13.

- **And what about tomorrow?** *“So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own,”* Matthew 6:34.
- **We should daily seek wisdom (Proverbs 8:34) and keep our heart open to God’s voice.** *“TODAY, IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS,”* Hebrews 3:7–8.
- **The process of seeking wisdom and hearing God’s voice involves prayer.** Remember that Daniel had a daily routine of prayer—morning, noon, and night (Daniel 6:10).
- **We should encourage one another on a daily basis.** *“But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,”* Hebrews 3:13.
- **And finally, just as God rested on the seventh day, we should rest daily in God’s love and faithfulness.** *“So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His,”* Hebrews 4:9–10.

Anna is an example of a woman in Scripture who redeemed the time **all** the days of her life. Look at her story in Luke 2:36–38. Anna was widowed at an early age after only seven years of marriage. Following this tragedy in her young life, she committed her days to serve in the temple *“night and day with fastings and*

prayer.” At the age of 84 (around 60 years later), she was still there redeeming the time in service to God.

The Lord honored Anna by allowing her to be present in the temple with Simeon when the baby Jesus was brought forth for dedication. After seeing Jesus, she shared the good news with everyone she met: the long-awaited Messiah has come! Anna shines forth as a wonderful example of one who wisely and productively used all the days of her life.

God encourages us to run our race faithfully to the end, not to give up short of the finish line. Since I was a marathon and ultra-marathon runner back in my younger days, I have always been drawn to the passage in Hebrews 12:1–3 where we are commanded to *“run with endurance the race that is set before us.”* Since I was out running when I met my husband, it is one of the first verses of Scripture he shared with me after leading me to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12:1–3 reads like this:

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.”

The command given in these verses is to *“run with endurance the race ... set before us.”* The writer then gives three things for us to focus on in order to accomplish this goal:

1. Look to the “*cloud of witnesses*.”

The “*cloud of witnesses*” are those who have run their race faithfully before us. Their stories are recorded for us in Scripture, and God has put them there for a reason: that we might learn from their mistakes and be motivated by their victories (1 Corinthians 10:11). Many of them are listed in Hebrews 11, which is often called “the hall of faith.”

When I first began accompanying my husband on the mission field, a door of ministry began to open up to me in the countries and villages where we travelled. Poor and often uneducated women were in these villages, and they were hungry for words of truth that would encourage their hearts and guide them in their walk with Jesus Christ.

It was out of the question to study in-depth passages and principles of Scripture with them—they needed something more concrete and practical than concepts. So I began to look more intently at the stories of women in Scripture and taught these village ladies simple, real-to-life principles from God’s Word by “hanging them” onto the example of women who had lived before them. I found this approach to Scripture to be fascinating as we entered into the tests, trials, heartaches, and victories of women who lived many centuries ago. They came to life for me!

It proved not only to be the best way to teach my village sisters, but I found that it encouraged my faith as well. Because, as the old saying goes, “what one man (or woman) can do, another man (or woman) can do”—by God’s grace, of course. If God was faithful to Sarah, Ruth, Mary and a host of other women in Scripture, then I can be confident that He will be faithful to me as well! And now, I consider so many women in Scripture to be my friends. I can’t wait to get to eternity and invite

Abigail, Anna, Tabitha and others over to my mansion, sit down, have a “cuppa” with them, and hear— firsthand—their story of God’s faithfulness.

When our first two boys were little, we were living in Conway, Arkansas. Each year, they celebrated “Toad Suck Days.” Hey, it’s Arkansas! As part of this community celebration, they would have a 10K road race and a one-mile race for the children. So we entered Carson (age 4) and Wil (age 2) in the children’s race.

Wil was wearing a little blue and white striped shirt with a big, red number “1” on it. He was the littlest guy on the track; yet, he was a kid with a big heart and tried so hard to keep up with the bigger kids. As Wil came around the last turn, all the other children had already finished, and their parents were greeting them and hugging them at the finish line. I was standing alongside the track, and when my little Wil turned the corner, he just looked so tired. His legs were wobbly, his lips were turning purple, and he looked like he was about to cry and give up.

Then, the announcer saw him. He came on the microphone and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, we still have one runner on the track, little Willy Cunningham—the big number one!” When the folks in the stands heard the announcement, they stood up and cheered for little Willy Cunningham. When Wil heard those cheers coming from the grandstand, something changed in his heart. He gained courage and strength, took a big breath, and sprinted to the finish line!

So, as you are running your race with endurance, listen for the cheers of those who have run before you. Let their lives shout out encouragement to you, follow their example, and never give up!

2. Lay aside sin and encumbrance.

When a runner steps onto the track to race, he takes off his outer layer of clothing in order to run “light.” Heavy clothing encumbers him—hindering both speed and endurance. That’s just the way it is. But, so often in the spiritual race of life, we try to run under a load of sin and burden that God does not intend for us to bear. Obviously, sins are the things we think, say, and do that are in violation of God’s standards and precepts.

What is an encumbrance? The dictionary defines it as “a hindrance or an impediment.” Spiritually, an encumbrance is a care or burden that impedes our spiritual power or growth. There may be some things in your life that are distracting you from “*the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ*” (2 Corinthians 11:3). If so, dump them!

3. Fix your eyes on Jesus!

Jesus considered it a joy to endure all that He did leading up to, and including, substitutionary death on the cross in order to redeem sinful man. God sent His only Son to this Earth with a mission: to exact from Him the wages of sin, in order that we might receive the free gift of eternal life through faith in Him (Romans 6:23). He ran His race faithfully from his first toddling steps out of the crib, to His last steps leading to Golgotha; and in perfect holiness that is unique to the Son of God, every step in between was planted right where the Heavenly Father wanted it to be. He never stepped out of His lane or walked off the track. Fix your eyes on Jesus!

We have a friend named Sheri Johnson. For 10 long years, she battled cancer that sapped her of strength and threatened her life. Then, several years ago, she and her family were in a serious car accident and she became completely paralyzed from the chest down, with only

limited use of her arms and hands. She left her house one morning on long, strong legs and returned in a wheelchair never to walk again.

As you can imagine, this has been an enormous test for her and her family—the likes of which I could not properly describe. When we were in Colorado for a conference, we went to the hospital where she was undergoing therapy to visit her, in hopes of lending some encouragement. Gene and I were both a bit apprehensive as to how we would react when we first saw her face-to-face. Then, the doors of the waiting room opened, and her husband Kurt pushed Sheri into the room in her wheelchair. Honestly, it was as if the glory of God suddenly filled the room! This woman was glowing in the midst of pain, exhaustion, and trial.

This is the often-repeated motto of her life, *“As difficult as this trial is to bear, it is nothing compared to what Jesus Christ did on the cross for me.”* Sheri is fixing her eyes on Jesus and—on paralyzed legs—running with endurance the race that is set before her. And her husband Kurt and daughter Lauren are right there with her every step of the way.

Consider the words of Dorothy Sayers in her essay, *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*: *“... for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death —He [God] had the honesty and courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was*

born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.”

In whatever trial or situation you are enduring at the time, remind yourself that Jesus has “been there, done that.” Hebrews 4:15 says, *“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”* In all of your trials, Jesus Christ is your sympathizer, your strength, and your example. He is there with you to uphold you, strengthen you, pray for you, and carry you through. Fix your eyes on Jesus and never give up!

The daily renewing of the mind, using time wisely, running faithfully to the end ... these are all challenging concepts from God’s Word. But if we incorporate them into our spiritual life, there will be application of them in our marriage; and we can do our husbands *“good and not evil all the days of [our] life”* (Proverbs 31:12).

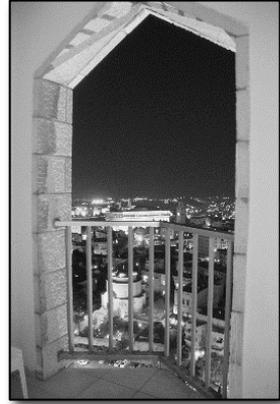
Lesson Four: Viewpoint

*“She looks for wool and flax,
and works with her hands in delight.
She is like merchant ships;
she brings her food from afar.”*

Proverbs 31:13–14

ד ה

Verse 13 starts with the Hebrew letter *daleth*. *Daleth* is the picture of a **door**, and speaks of **decisions** and **direction**.



Verse 14 starts with the Hebrew letter *hay*. *Hay* pictures a **window**, and speaks of **viewpoint** and **perspective**.

The woman of honor lives with the wisdom of God.

In Proverbs 31:10–12, our attention is drawn to the value of the virtuous woman and the soul-relationship she has with her husband. But in Proverbs 31:13, the emphasis of the poem moves from soul relationships to the activities of the virtuous woman. The writer now expands on how she practically prospers her household and deals good to her husband and family. Remember that faith, wisdom, and inner beauty will be reflected in what we do. Faith without works is dead (James 2:20)!

The principles found in Proverbs 31:13–14 are so similar that we can easily combine them into one lesson. The use of the *daleth* file, picturing a door, reminds us of the importance of the decisions in a woman’s life. Each and every day, we are confronted with many choices. How we handle these decisions is dependent on our viewpoint and perspective to life (which we find emphasized in Proverbs 31:14). The perspective that we have, and the decisions that we make, vitally affect our life and the lives of those in our home. In covering this section it is important to remember that God gives us free will, the

prerogative of making our own decisions. However, the result of those decisions is not our prerogative, but God's. We reap what we sow in both the physical and spiritual life. If we sow obedience, we reap blessing; if we sow in disobedience, we reap God's discipline.

In verse 13, we find the virtuous woman going out her door to look for wool and flax. When she finds quality wool and flax, she returns to her home and—with joy and vitality—works with her hands to make the clothes the family will wear. Flax was a plant found in the ancient world, from which linen is made. She is out in the world seeking the best for her family's wardrobe.

In verse 14, we see a similar principle whereby her perspective in providing the family's food is to look afar to provide the best for her table. She is not satisfied with what she can find in her local market, but looks beyond it to find the most nutritious and tasty food for them.

The virtuous woman is found in these verses. In the midst of activity and work, she is seeking, looking, working ... and for what purpose? Because she cares about her family! For those of us living in the present-day culture, we equate the best in clothing with the latest fashion, and the best in food with that which is probably the tastiest and most expensive. But the emphasis here is not on the superficial. The emphasis is on what provides best for their true—not frivolous—needs.

She selects and sews clothing that will be sturdy, attractive, and warm for her family. She chooses food that will be fresh, healthy, and nutritious. We need to be mindful of what we feed our family and ourselves. If God does not want us feeding our soul on false doctrine or worldly thinking, it is wise to apply that same principle to our bodies. Eat to live; don't live to eat. Nourish your body; don't just feed it. Out of all that the world has to offer (and it offers a lot of junk!), the virtuous woman puts in the time and energy to secure the valuable. She chooses that which will best prosper and bless her family.

Remember that 1 Timothy 6:8 tells us, *“if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content.”* This is certainly a principle we should all strive to follow because so often we are distracted by discontent in these areas. When we have just the basics of something to fill our belly and something to cover our body, we should be content. But when it is within our means to provide something better than the basics for our family, then we should be eager to do so. The important thing is to find the proper balance in these areas: to desire and to seek after the best that we can afford, and then to be content with that provision.

But the wisdom of the virtuous woman, and the decisions that reflect that wisdom, should be displayed in more than just the food and clothing she provides for her family. She must have a divine viewpoint that can look out into the world and discern what parts of it she can use to enrich their lives, and what part of it will be detrimental. Like a merchant ship, when she goes out into the world, she wants to bring back from it only what would bless them. Of all the choices that are available in the world today, she must make decisions for her family that will embrace the profitable and forsake the harmful.

This principle would apply to every area of our life and our home. The world has so many enticing things in the way of fun and recreation. It has so much to offer that takes our time, money, and energies. There are many emotional traps that we can fall into which could rob us of the joy we should have with our Lord and Savior. Some of these things may even be good in themselves, but if they are outside of God’s plan for our life, then they become harmful choices.

In comparison with other ages and cultures, the times in which we are living demand great wisdom and discernment, lest we be pulled away from the best God has for us, to settle for the “good” with which Satan can deceive us. We must scrutinize our own thinking and doing, and see how much we have succumbed to the world’s thoughts and ways. Consider the words of Jeremiah—words that have often convicted me:

“And if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman.”

Jeremiah 15:19b

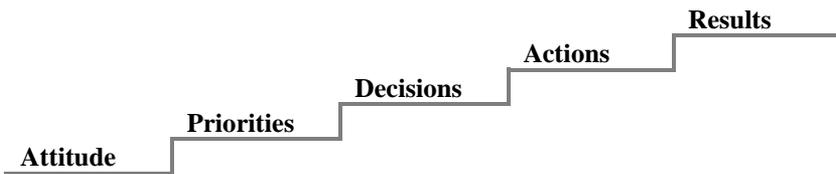
It is a fact that we are in the world; this is our battle arena and the course where our race is run. But Philippians 3:20 tells us that our citizenship is in Heaven. We are in the world but not of the world! Therefore, our perspective (the window that we use to view life) must be to seek the things above:

“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”

Colossians 3:1–2

When we set our minds on the things above, we develop a humble and heavenly viewpoint to life—one that seeks spiritual priorities. Our decisions will then reflect this priority. Our actions will be the outworking of the wise decisions we have made. The results of our decisions will be blessing rather than cursing, for we have rightly chosen according to divine—not earthly—standards. God is free to bless the soul and family that live according to His standards and His priorities! Discernment is necessary to choose godly options.

Think of this in terms of a decision-making ladder:



- **Attitude**. Is my attitude humble or arrogant? (1 Peter 5:5)
- **Priority**. Are my priorities spiritual or carnal? (Colossians 3:1)

- **Decisions.** Are my decisions wise or foolish? (Ephesians 5:15)
- **Actions.** Are my actions right or wrong? (James 3:13)
- **Results.** Have I chosen the path to blessing or cursing? (Deuteronomy 11:26–28)

The Bible has a lot to say about our struggle in this world because it is the instruction manual that the Lord has given us to have victory in this life—victory that overcomes our own sin nature, our enemy the devil, and the lures of this world!

- First, we see that we must choose to set our affection and attention on God and God alone! The Scripture reminds us that we cannot love this present world and the Lord at the same time! *“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever,”* 1 John 2:15–17.
- Not only does the Bible tell us that we cannot have a dual affection with the world and God, it continues on to call us enemies of God if we try to “buddy up” to the ways of this world! *“You adulteresses [spiritually unfaithful], do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God?”* James 4:4.
- The world cannot love us when we love God. Therefore, if you desire to seek the things above, you can expect to be hated and opposed by the world! *“If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you,”* John 15:19.

- All that the world has to offer is not worth losing our own soul or forfeiting eternal blessing. *“For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?”* Luke 9:25. How many world leaders, movie stars, and sports heroes do we see around us today who have won all the fame and glamour that this world has to offer, and yet have not even considered the eternal destiny of their own soul? They have forfeited everything!
- We show our true relationship with God by keeping ourselves *“unstained”* by the world. *“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this; to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world,”* James 1:27.
- The Lord Himself prays for our protection against Satan, for the purpose of fulfilling our ministry to the world (John 17:9–18). *“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world,”* John 16:33. In the midst of the world and its tribulations, we should have peace, joy, and courage—because Christ has *“overcome the world”*!
- When we, by faith, enter into the family of God, we share the victory that Christ has over the world. *“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”* 1 John 5:4–5. How encouraging it is to know that simple faith is the greatest overcomer of all, because then we enter into the victory of Jesus Christ!

Now consider the words of 1 Corinthians 1:27, *“But God has chosen the **foolish things** of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the **weak things** of the world to shame the things which are strong.”*

The world always considers those of faith as foolish and weak. It is a struggle that has gone on from the beginning of time and will continue until Christ has subjected all things under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25–27, see also Psalm 8:6). It is a struggle that we are presently experiencing. The world taunts us and says “turn to **our** wisdom and you will be acceptable; turn to **our** strength and you will prevail.” But the wisdom of God is available to His children: to guide them, empower them, and to give them victory over the struggles of this world.

In Scripture, Egypt is a picture of this. The first two chapters of Exodus provide us with a brilliant story to illustrate how virtue and faith in a woman can overcome this constant struggle with the world! Exodus 1 gives us a summary of the oppression of the Jewish people, approximately 400 years after Joseph had led his family into Egypt. The chapter ends with the startling command of Pharaoh to the Hebrew people, “*Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive*” (Exodus 1:22).

In Acts 7:19, Stephen, in his bold address to unbelieving Israel, confirms that some of the Jews at this time were actually obeying Pharaoh’s edict and exposing their children unto death. How could they obey such an evil command? They had been drawn into the lure of Egypt, into its idolatrous religion, into its heathen customs, and into a fear of its Pharaoh—rather than God. This is shown to us in Joshua 24:14, when Joshua commands them to “*put away the [false] gods*” that they served in Egypt. Read also Ezekiel 20:6–10.

So, in Exodus 1, we see the “wise” and “strong” nation of Egypt ruling over the Jews, abusing them and even legalizing murder to keep them in subjection. But remember, 1 Corinthians 1:27 tells us that God uses the weak and foolish. In Egypt, God used a seemingly insignificant Jewish slave woman to overcome, by faith, all of the strength, wisdom, and evil plans of the most powerful ruler on the face of the earth—the Egyptian Pharaoh!

“Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months.”

Exodus 2:1–2

By comparing this with Exodus 6:20, we see that the man’s name is “*Amram*,” meaning “promoted,” and the woman’s name is “*Jochebed*,” meaning “God-honoring.” Hebrews 11:23 says that “*By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.*”

The mothers and fathers, who had turned away from God to the lure of Egypt, ended up fearing Pharaoh and obeying his evil command. But Amram and Jochebed were able to stay faithful to the Lord and His ways in the midst of an evil and idolatrous land. The time came when they had to choose to fear and obey God, or fear and obey the king. The life of their son depended on their decision. By God’s grace and wisdom, they were able to have a divine perspective and make proper decisions. They excluded the world’s view to do what was right in the sight of their God. They, by faith, spared the life of their beautiful, little, male child, Moses. God, by grace, honored them for it. It is the faith of Jochebed and Amram that the Word of God speaks about in Hebrews 11:23.

This verse indicates they “*saw [Moses] was a beautiful child.*” In the Hebrew, it indicates they perceived that Moses was not just beautiful in appearance but had a special purpose in God’s plan. They discerned him to be the one who God would use to deliver Israel out of Egypt. This hard-working, Jewish slave couple did not act on chance or an emotional whim. They acted on their knowledge of God’s Word. In Genesis 15:13–16, God reveals to Abraham the captivity of Israel in Egypt and the amount of time they will be enslaved. Jochebed and her husband, being familiar with their spiritual history, would have known the time for deliverance was upon them.

The rest of Exodus 2 tells the familiar story of the wise mother Jochebed who gets a little basket for her special son, covers it with tar and pitch for waterproofing, and places him in the Nile River. Her daughter Miriam watches the baby from the banks of the Nile until the Pharaoh's own daughter finds him nestled safely among the bulrushes at the edge of the river. This princess desires to keep the baby as her own, but that raises a problem: how will she nurse him? So Miriam quickly speaks up and offers to bring a woman to the princess who is able to nurse the child. Of course, Moses' own mother is called and given the task of taking the beautiful baby boy back to her home, to suckle at her breast, to be loved and cherished by his own family.

This would have given Amram and Jochebed several years to teach and train Moses, to instill in his young soul an awareness of God and a sense of duty to Him. The evil of this world cannot overcome the humble faith of one woman living with divine perspective, making faithful choices, and under the perfect care of our heavenly Father!

Let's look at that decision ladder from the viewpoint of Jochebed's life:

- **Attitude**: Submission and reverence to God, not the world
- **Priority**: Obedience to God, not man
- **Decisions**: To protect her family, not fearing consequences
- **Actions**: Hiding the child in the basket
- **Results**: Moses, the deliverer of Israel, is delivered!

The faith of Amram and Jochebed is recorded for our example and edification!

If we are able to daily distinguish the world's viewpoint from the Lord's, and if we are able to daily make choices and decisions to follow the Lord's guidance, then, when the crisis comes to us, we

will know what to do. We will choose what is best for our family and ourselves!

In contrast to Jochebed, consider the story of Lot's wife found in Genesis 19:1–26. Mrs. Lot is a perfect example of being bound with a love for this world rather than a love for God. She and her family lived in the midst of an evil and immoral culture. When the Lord came to deliver them from impending judgment upon the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, she had direct orders to leave the city and not look back. Even with these direct orders, she could not cut the emotional bond she had with that community. As she followed Lot out of the city, she "*looked back.*" Mrs. Lot had made herself comfortable in this world—she had compromised her standards. So when the time came to make a decision regarding obedience to God, she could not do it. Her love for this world became her death trap!

The same principle is seen in Acts 5:1–10 with Ananias and Sapphira. They purposed together to lie about the price of their land so that they could deceptively withhold some of the sale price for themselves. When questioned by Peter, Ananias was the first to lie and instantly died. Later, Sapphira came in and told the same lie. God gave this woman the opportunity to stand on her own and tell the truth. He did not discipline her on the basis of her husband's lie, but because of her own. Even in marriage, we are each individually accountable to God for the decisions we make.

The examples of Lot's wife and Sapphira are both very dramatic. Scripture uses dramatic examples to clearly make a point and get our attention. By using these examples, I am not trying to imply that your next foolish decision is going to lead to immediate death! But it will lead to bad consequences of some kind. Remember, God gives us control over our own choices, but He alone determines the consequences of our choices!

In decision-making, we must allow the Word of God to work together with the Spirit of God to guide us in life. Psalm 119:105

says “*Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*” And John 16:13 tells us that “*the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all truth.*” What disastrous mistakes we make when we lean on our own judgment and understanding rather than the infallible leadership of God the Holy Spirit and the truth of His Word. Let us be encouraged by Proverbs 31:13–14 to make decisions as women that will put the Lord Jesus Christ and His plan foremost in our life and in our family!

Lesson Five: Stability

*“She rises also while it is still night
and gives food to her household and
portions to her maidens.”*

Proverbs 31:15



Verse 15 starts with the Hebrew letter *vav*. *Vav* pictures a **peg** and speaks of **security** and **stability**.

The woman of honor brings stability to her home.

In this verse, we see the diligence and organization of the virtuous woman. She is eager to meet the day, rises while it is still early to plan the day’s activities, and ensures that everyone in the home is on board. Probably no one reading this study has “*maidens*” or helpers to share the load of the household work. We are probably on our own in that department! Yet, the principle conveyed here is that the virtuous woman is on top of things. Her energy and organization bring a sense of consistency to the home so that those living with her—her husband and/or children—can count on the home being a stable environment.

If you have ever been camping in wind, rain, and adverse weather, you know just how important a tent peg is to the stability of that tent and the comfort of the night. A tent peg may seem like a small, insignificant thing, but when it digs in and holds up the tent on a cold and wet night, it is the difference between success and ruin! That little peg becomes the security and stability of the tent itself. The Word of God here is making the analogy between the tent peg and the woman of honor, to encourage us to dig in and stand firm in the storms of life.

It is interesting in Proverbs 31 how one verse builds upon another. In Proverbs 31:13–14, we saw the woman of honor

making wise decisions based on a divine viewpoint to life. Her wise decisions bless and prosper her and her family. Here in verse 15, we see that the woman of honor also becomes a source of strength and stability in her home.

In Isaiah 22:23, this same Hebrew word *vav* is used for a mature believer having a salty, preserving effect in history. This corresponds to the words of Christ in Matthew 5:13 when He said, *“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.”*

Certainly, Lot’s wife had lost her saltiness through a love of this world, and so God saw fit to turn her into a pillar of salt that would stand for all time as a memorial to one whose life had become tasteless. She was not a source of strength and stability to her home but rather was removed by death from her husband and daughters.

By contrast, Jochebed’s wise decisions brought stability to the home—even saving the life of baby Moses. As well, the effect went beyond the home to bring stability to the Jewish people as Moses’ life was spared, and he grew to be the deliverer of Israel. What far-reaching effects our faith and virtue can have on those around us!

In the Book of Joshua, we find another remarkable story of a woman of faith being the “tent peg” of her home and family. Rahab, the harlot, stands in Scripture as a heroine of faith—one of our spiritual ancestors after whom we should model our faith! Hebrews 11:31 tells us that *“By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.”* It seems that the qualifications for being listed in Hebrews 11, “the hall of faith,” is to have great failures in life along with great victories. Rahab had both. That should give hope to you and me!

Joshua 2 records the story of this young heathen woman who was transformed by the one true and living God of the Bible and played a significant role in the battle for Jericho. We see in Joshua 2:10–11 that Rahab had heard of the great works that God did in parting the Red Sea to deliver His chosen people from the hands of the Egyptian army. Just the hearing of this story was enough to convince her heart to trust in the God of Israel and to declare that trust with these words of faith, “*The LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.*” Without any further instruction in the Word of the Lord, without others around her to model her faith after, and without the prayer and support of believing friends or family, Rahab acted in faith to hide the spies from the Jericho army. Her faith gave her the desire to turn away from the world and associate herself with the people of Israel—others who were children of the one true and living God.

As the attacking army of Israel gathered around the walls of Jericho, Rahab—in obedience to the spies’ command—hung the scarlet cord from her window on the wall. According to God’s instruction, Joshua obediently led his army to encircle the walls of Jericho for six days. On the seventh day, he circled with the people seven times. The seventh time, Joshua commanded the priests to blow the trumpets and the warriors to shout; the walls of Jericho came crumbling down!

In the devastation that was left behind, one small portion of wall remained—the wall that was home to a harlot who had been transformed by the power of God’s grace. For, **by faith**, she believed in the works and ways of God; **by faith**, she hid the spies; **by faith**, she hung the scarlet cord. And **by grace**, the Lord preserved her, her family, and all of their belongings. Rahab’s virtue and faith in times of trial and judgment became the “tent peg”—the security and the stability of her home and family.

Joshua 6:25 tells us “*she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.*”

But, in Scripture, Rahab's story does not end with these words. From looking at the genealogies of Matthew 1, we find that Rahab married a Jewish man named Salmon (thought to be one of the spies she hid in her home) and became the proud mother of a male child named Boaz. Boaz then married a woman of excellence named Ruth. So we see that Rahab was the mother-in-law of Ruth and the great, great grandmother of King David. We don't know if Rahab was still living when her son married Ruth. If she was, imagine what wonderful times of fellowship Rahab and Ruth must have had as they shared with each other the stories of God's grace and faithfulness in their lives. And what a marvelous example of God's grace that a former harlot would be transformed into a woman of excellence, found in the lineage of King David and Jesus Christ himself!

Jesus Christ is the face of hope and forgiveness. His grace transformed Rahab from a harlot to a heroine. God looked beyond the sins of her past, even beyond the lie she told to those seeking the spies—God saw her faith. That is always what our Lord is on the lookout for because that is what is pleasing to Him (Hebrews 11:6). Her faith was the stability of her life, her family, and her home. Isn't it interesting that her exemplary faith was not the result of many years of teaching and learning, but the result of trusting because she had heard of the mighty works of God!

Our faith has a much stronger, deeper, and more comprehensive foundation than Rahab's ever had. As believers living in the Church Age, we have the completed Canon of Scripture to assure and reassure us of the faithfulness of our God and Savior. Book after book speaks of His perfect plan for us; chapter after chapter declares His love for us; and verse after verse draws us into intimacy with Him. When we consider the magnitude of the spiritual assets God has bestowed upon us, we really have no excuse but to "*stand firm*" in faith.

Every day, we need to wake up to the fact that the spiritual forces of wickedness are targeting our souls, our marriages, our children, our homes, our churches, and our country. Ephesians 6:11–19 is one of

several New Testament passages which encourages us to “*stand firm*” in our faith in the midst of this attack. The Greek word for “*stand firm*” is *histemi*, and is sometimes used—in the military sense—meaning “to hold a watch post” or “to stand and hold a critical position of the battlefield.” How imperative it is for us to recognize the seriousness of the attack we are under and the importance of standing firm in the midst of that attack! Consider the gravity of these New Testament passages on “standing firm” and how you can implement them in your life:

- **Romans 14:4; 1 Corinthians 15:1.** The Lord Jesus Christ and salvation through Him enables us to stand firm in our faith. If Jesus did the most for us by dying on the cross, won't He also supply what is necessary for us to stand firm in the trials of life?
- **Romans 5:2; 1 Peter 5:12.** God's grace is the provision by which we are able to stand in the trials of this life. It's encouraging to know that it doesn't depend on us!
- **Ephesians 6:11–16.** Standing firm requires dressing your soul in the “*armor of God*” (remember the old woman in Perth Royal Hospital).
- **Ephesians 6:18.** Standing firm requires “*pray[ing] at all times in the Spirit*” with alertness and perseverance.
- **Psalms 68:19.** He “*daily bears our burden[s]*” enabling us to stand firm.
- **Philippians 4:6–7; Isaiah 26:3.** Prayer and meditation on the love of Christ gives the soul stability.
- **2 Corinthians 1:24.** We encourage others in the Body of Christ when we stand firm in our faith. (Sometimes our lives can have a “domino” effect on others. When we topple, they topple. When we stand, they stand.)

- **Colossians 4:12.** We should pray for others to stand firm in their faith.

Through over forty years of being a pastor's wife, I have had both the burden and privilege of observing many women in the midst of life's trials. Some were obvious and public trials, while others were hidden and private. All these trials were crucial to the health of their own souls, their marriages, and their children. Yet, I have observed so many women over the years dig in like a tent peg and be the stability of their families in a time when their husbands were wavering or the world's storms were at their door.

I have observed women who have stood firm when the enemy has snuck into their home in the form of adultery, pornography, drug abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, desertion, loss, poverty ... the list goes on and on. Their willingness to dress in the armor of God and cling to His grace during these raging storms saved many marriages and impacted the future of countless children.

When husbands waver in their faith and conduct, we need to stand firm. Some will return, some will not. But to each woman who remains in the strong position of faith, God will show Himself faithful. Whatever mighty wind might be blowing in your life right now, know that you have an Anchor for your soul—the Lord Jesus Christ! Stand in that Anchor. Stand firm!

Lesson Six: Courage

*“She considers a field and
buys it; from her earnings
she plants a vineyard.”*

Proverbs 31:16



Verse 16 starts with the Hebrew letter *zayin*. *Zayin* pictures a **sword** and speaks of **courage** and **aggressiveness**.

The woman of honor is bold as a lion!

*“The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the
righteous are bold as a lion.”* Proverbs 28:1

*“For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but
of power and love and discipline.”* 2 Timothy 1:7

In the first five lessons of Proverbs 31, the focus has been on the woman of honor and her role within the home and family. But verse 16 moves the virtuous woman outside the home, dealing in business and profit. We see her in this verse considering (using wisdom and discernment) the purchase of a field and then closing in on the deal. (In the Hebrew language, she “seizes” it—indicating quick action once the decision is made.) She apparently has some earnings reserved from a previous business venture and is now going to invest them in the planting of a vineyard.

In God’s perfect plan, the man is the initiator and the woman, the responder. Responsiveness and submission are beautiful traits of the godly female. But we see from the *zayin* file and from other passages in the Word of God, that there is a time and place for us, as women, to be bold and aggressive.

When the woman of honor is acting in faith, as a response to the guidance of her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, it is time to move forward with confidence and courage. At times, that confidence and courage will come in the form of willingness to trust and wait. At other times, it will come in the form of action. Daniel 11:32b holds true for the woman, as well as the man, when it says, “*but the people who know their God will display strength and take action!*” Feminine aggressiveness, as a result of faith, is a virtue of the excellent woman. Let us not forget that this faith is in response to what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us! God initiates in grace, and we respond in faith.

Let’s look at some examples of women of faith who have lived before us, and still live in Scripture as examples of those who display strength and take action. I am going to start with perhaps the most confronting:

Jael: Bold in Defense of Family and Country

Judges 4:17–21; 5:24–27

The book of Judges chronicles a time in Israel when “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 21:25). Sounds like the world we live in today! During the time that Deborah the prophetess was judge over Israel, Sisera of Canaan was threatening the peace and freedom of the nation. At God’s command, Deborah sent Barak, with 10,000 of his soldiers, to pursue the chariots of Sisera. God intervened in the battle with storm and torrent (Judges 5:19–23) and, by God’s grace, Barak won the victory over Sisera’s army.

However, during the heat of the battle, Sisera, the commander, jumped away from the chariots and fled on foot. He was met by Jael, the wife of a Kenite man living in harmony with Israel. Jael recognized Sisera as the enemy leader. She welcomed him into her tent and covered him with a rug for warmth and comfort. When he asked her for a drink of water, Jael cunningly gave him some warm milk to drink, causing him to relax, and Sisera soon felt a nap calling. So he spoke to Jael with these words, “*Stand*

in the doorway of the tent, and it shall be if anyone comes and inquires of you, and says, 'Is there anyone here?' That you shall say 'No' " (Judges 4:20).

But from here on, the hospitality of Jael takes a sly turn, for she realizes she has an opportunity to fight a battle with the enemy of Israel right in the midst of her own tent! Jael's concern was not for the evil man Sisera but for the welfare of those she loved. Her concern was for her family and her nation. So, when he was slumbering away, she acted quickly and courageously. Jael picked up a tent peg (remember the tent peg represents stability in the home) and forcefully hammered it through the enemy's temple. Sisera had escaped the sword of Barak and his strong soldiers, but he could not escape the tent peg of this courageous woman of God!

This is a David-and-Goliath type story with a feminine hero as the victor. Excuse me, but this woman had balls! In case you're not sure if Jael's actions were praiseworthy, consider Judges 5:24–27 where the Spirit of God praises both her actions and her cunning nature:

*"Most blessed of women is Jael,
The wife of Heber the Kenite;
Most blessed is she of women in the tent.
He asked for water and she gave him milk;
In a magnificent bowl she brought him curds.*

*She reached out her hand for the tent peg,
And her right hand for the workmen's hammer.
Then she struck Sisera, she smashed his head;
And she shattered and pierced his temple."*

Whew! God's Word is vivid in detail. Jael's actions changed the course of this battle and helped deliver Israel from the oppression of the enemy. When Deborah and Barak sing their victory song of praise to God for His deliverance, they call the time "*the days of Jael*" (Judges 5:6). Her cunning and courage historically impacted her nation and her people!

America, and many other nations and cultures, is under great attack at this time. The very fabric of freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is being eroded by men who are puppets in the devil's hands. We, as Christians, are to be the "*salt of the earth*" (Matthew 5:13) and "*the light of the world*" (Matthew 5:14). Our faith should be put into action in such a way as to preserve the freedoms of our nation and light the path for future generations.

Let the Word of God so permeate your soul, your thoughts, and your actions that you become the strong salt and light that you are meant to be. With this divine weapon in your soul, follow the guidance of God to battle the evils in this world in whatever way He leads you. And above all, pray! Prayer is another powerful weapon that should be used with boldness in every day and age.

This would be the spiritual application of what Jael did. But let's think in practical terms as well. Are you prepared—emotionally and physically—to defend yourself and/or your children from rape, abduction, or some other violent attack? If not, it might be wise to get some training in how to use a hammer and tent peg—or some other modern-day weapon!

Jael is not the only woman in Scripture we see displaying strength and courage. Let's look at some other examples, always keeping in mind that these women are taking action as a result of their faith-response to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Samaritan Woman: Bold in Evangelism

John 4:1–42

This is a beautiful passage that shows us the love and compassion of Jesus Christ to all people, regardless of their race, culture, or sinful state. This woman was living in immorality and she was also a Samaritan—people with whom normal, upstanding Jews would not associate.

But Christ saw beyond all of this to the spiritual need of her soul, so the two of them entered into a quiet discussion in the heat of the day at the well outside her village. The discussion led the woman to understand that Jesus Christ was the long-awaited Messiah. As soon as she came to this conclusion, she immediately left her water pots, rose up and went to tell the others in her town what Christ had done for her! The result was that many from her village also came out to see Jesus Christ and accepted for themselves the gift of eternal life.

The Samaritan woman didn't go to Bible college and had no theological degree or training. She didn't worry about what she didn't know; instead she communicated what she did know. This seemingly insignificant woman led a revival in her own village and among her people because she was willing and ready to share the Good News of what Christ had done for her!

- **Luke 19:10** says, *“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost.”* Jesus Christ went out of his way to visit this Samaritan well at the very time He knew this woman would be there drawing water. He sought her out to deliver to her the Good News of salvation. How did she respond? She immediately sought out those in her village with whom she could share this newfound treasure. How quickly she displayed a Christ-like character!
- **2 Corinthians 5:18–19**, *“Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation ... and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”* Because of the love that Christ displayed in seeking and saving us, we should respond like the Samaritan woman in taking up the ministry of reconciliation. For all around us, there is a world on the brink of eternal condemnation. If we don't tell them, who will?

Rebekah: Bold in Hospitality

Genesis 24:10–21

When Abraham discerned it was the right time to find a wife for his son Isaac, he sent his servant Eleazer to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor, to find a woman of God’s choosing, from among his own people. But of all the women in the land, how would the servant know which one God had chosen to be the bride of Isaac? The servant would only know by following God’s leadership. So as the young women of the village are coming out to the well, the servant prays these words to the Lord:

*“May it be that the girl to whom I say, ‘Please let down your jar so that I may drink,’ and who answers, ‘**Drink, and I will water your camels also**’—may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master.”*

Genesis 24:14

Before he even finished speaking, a beautiful young lady named Rebekah appeared at the well. The servant politely asked her for a drink of water and she replied with words that revealed to Eleazer her hospitality, respect, and grace:

*“**Drink my lord**’; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand and gave him a drink. Now when she had finished giving him a drink she said **‘I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking.’**”*

Genesis 24:18–19

Eleazer was travelling with ten thirsty camels. A camel can drink 30–50 gallons of water at a time. Do the math and you will conclude with me that Rebekah’s actions were a huge offer of hospitality that required quite an expenditure of work. Rebekah was no couch potato! Three times in these verses, the words “*quickly*” and “*ran*” are used indicating Rebekah’s eagerness to be hospitable to this stranger, even when it meant hardship.

- **Philippians 4:19** tells us, “*And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*” As a child of God, I am under His care and provision. He supplies all of my needs so that I can aggressively help to supply the needs of others! Christ daily shows us hospitality as His guests in this world, so that we can display similar hospitality to those the Lord brings to our attention.
- We are encouraged in **1 Peter 4:9** to “*be hospitable to one another without complaint.*” Hmmm! I find it interesting that Peter included the words, “*without complaint.*”

Naaman’s Servant Girl: Bold in Compassion

2 Kings 5:1–3

This is an amazing story of a little Jewish girl who was taken captive into the land of Aram and worked as a slave to Naaman’s wife. Naaman was a valiant warrior, but an unbeliever and a leper. This little girl certainly had enough sorrows of her own to deal with, yet she showed compassion to her master Naaman and suggested that he go to the prophet of Israel to be healed from leprosy. Her display of compassion—even in the light of her own suffering—resulted in Naaman being healed of leprosy, but more importantly being healed spiritually as he came to trust in the true and living God of Israel:

- **Isaiah 53:4–5, 7**, “*Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried ... He was pierced through for our transgressions ... the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him ... He was oppressed ... He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth.*”

If Christ endured all of this for us, because of His compassion for our fallen and lost condition, then shouldn’t we respond with compassion to the suffering of those around us?

- **2 Corinthians 1:3–4**, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction **so that** we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*

In this verse, the very name of our heavenly Father is the *“God of all comfort.”* Surely you have experienced more than one time in your own life when you have been comforted in His loving arms. If so, we owe a debt of comfort and compassion to those around us.

In this section, we have looked at four examples. What do Jael, Rebekah, the woman at the well, and Naaman’s servant girl have in common? They acted! Their faith moved them from fear, laziness, apathy, and despair to get up and do something. Jael could have cowered in her tent. Rebekah could have set down her water jars and let the servant water his own camels. The Samaritan woman could have kept the truth to herself, and the little servant girl could have polished the silver and left it at that. But all of these ladies chose, instead, to act!

In the examples above, we see the courage of women of faith to aggressively act in time of need. It is interesting to see, however, that in all of these stories, the bold and aggressive act of faith was to benefit not themselves, but another human being. This is because the love of Christ empowers our faith, giving it a beating heart, helping hands, and a ready voice. 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 says, *“For the love of Christ controls [compels, NKJV] us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”*

The word “control,” in the Greek, means “to drive forward under pressure,” as if our soul were a Coke can that’s been shaken up by the love of Christ, the tab popped, and the contents come

spouting out! When we enter into the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ, we have something so much greater than ourselves to live for—we have the privilege of living in moment-by-moment service to the only Man who ever walked out of His own grave! And in living for Him, we live to serve the needs of others.

However, at times, in life, we are the ones in great need. What then? Consider the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:25–34. Here, we have the story of a woman who suffered twelve long, hard years with a hemorrhage of blood. She had been down the disappointing path of seeing the doctors and spending her resources on medical treatment that did not help, and as a matter of fact, her condition got worse.

After hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind Him and touched His cloak. She thought, *“If I just touch His garments, I will get well.”* Immediately, the issue of blood stopped, and she was healed. I wonder how many others in the crowd had personal needs but refrained their hearts and hands from reaching out to Jesus? But this woman, in her desperation, went straight to the Source of help. We should do the same. Jesus said to her, *“Daughter, your faith has made you well ...”*

When we find our own selves in great need of body or soul, our aggressive faith can also be displayed in prayer. Consider the story of Hannah in the first chapter of 1 Samuel. Hannah spent a fair amount of time in bitterness and rejection. But when she finally decided to put her situation into God’s hands, she became aggressive in her prayer for a son—even to the point of desiring to dedicate him wholly to God. Before Hannah knew it, God had answered her prayer, opened her womb, and the bitterness fled from her heart.

“Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Hebrews 4:16

Because Christ has opened the way to the throne of grace for us, we should be aggressive in our prayer life, showing a total dependence on His grace and mercy. Sometimes, there is nothing in life we can aggressively do to deal with a difficult situation. This is when we need to focus our faith fervently on the power of prayer and then wait for His deliverance.

Scripture also gives some examples of misguided aggressiveness. We all are tempted at times to take matters into our own hands when we tire of waiting on God or even doubt His ability to help. Sarah did so in Genesis 16 when she came up with the human solution to the problem of her barrenness. Rather than wait for God to fulfill His promise, she gave her maiden Hagar to Abraham, and a son was born to them. Sarah later suffered for this mistake, and the line of Ishmael has been a curse and problem to Israel ever since. We must be sure that our aggressiveness and courage is in the area of faith—and not failure to trust God!

Let us, as women desiring excellence, consider the many ways that Christ daily acts in our behalf. Let us recognize the spiritual riches that we have in Him (read Ephesians 1). When we are rich because of His grace to us, our lives can be a channel of blessing to others. Our faith can be bold, full of courage and action, and we can say like David, “*My cup overflows!*” (Psalm 23:5).

Lesson Seven: Vigilance

“She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong.”

Proverbs 31:17



Verse 17 starts with the Hebrew letter *heth*. *Heth* pictures a **fence** or **enclosure** and speaks of **restraint, protection**.

The woman of honor is vigilant.

Proverbs 31:17 follows the thought of verse 16 in that the woman has considered a field, purchased it, planted a vineyard, and she continues on in hard work and strength. As we saw from the last verse, feminine aggressiveness and strength—when channeled in godly ways—are tremendous assets to a woman and a benefit to those around her.

This verse teaches us the virtue of hard work, whether it be in the home or in the work place. But strength comes in many areas. It is nice to have physical strength and health, but of far greater benefit is mental and spiritual strength.

From the *heth* file, picturing a fence or enclosure, we find the principle of the strength of the woman being applied in areas of protection and restraint. Even though God has designed the husband to be the protector of our body and soul, we must also develop the habit of protecting ourselves. As women of God, we are still living in the devil’s world and we find here three great enemies:

1. The world
2. The devil
3. The flesh

Each of these enemies scheme against us to draw our thoughts, attention, time, and loyalty to them rather than God. The world cries out, “Be conformed to me.” The devil lures us to serve his ways and purposes rather than our Lord’s. He was not successful in obtaining all of the things he craved to make him like God, but he still tries, in his arrogance, to reap for himself the loyalty that we should have for Christ and Christ alone! The flesh or sin nature living in us cries out, “Satisfy me—I want, want, want.”

Many times, the three enemies come together to “gang up” on us and sidetrack us from God’s perfect plan. If we are to display virtue as a woman, we must be wise and vigilant to the schemes around us, and we must be strong to protect ourselves from them!

The dictionary defines a scheme as “thought, purpose, to employ craft or deceit.” A scheme relies on deception and secrecy. Since it has an evil purpose and motive that leads to sin and destruction, those motives must be kept secret in order for the scheme to survive. When a scheme is brought to light or exposed, it comes to a quick end. If a scheme is not exposed, but rather comes to completion, often the results cannot be stopped or changed. We live with the consequences!

Our Enemy—the World

When we studied decision-making, we looked with some detail at the need to remove ourselves from the ways of the world—to choose the best that God has to offer, rather than the “good” with which the world deceives us. The world constantly bombards us with half-truths and lies. We find them in advertising, religion, politics, and entertainment, to name just a few. They are all designed to deceive us into thinking they offer what we need to fill the desires of body, soul, and spirit. Only Jesus can do that!

Consider these principles and verses to prepare you to face the schemes of this world:

1. Satan is the god of this world, 2 Corinthians 4:4.
2. We are not to love this world, 1 John 2:15.

3. A friend of the world is an enemy of God, James 4:4.
4. The world hates us, John 15:19!
5. We must keep ourselves unstained from the world, Galatians 6:14.

The most sure-fire protection we have against the schemes of this world is being under God's care, walking in fellowship with Him, and following His pathway for our life. He sees all, and an evil scheme is not hidden from His sight. In Micah 2:1, 3, we see the way God deals with the schemes of men: *“Woe to those who scheme iniquity, who work out evil on their beds! ... [for God plans] against this family a calamity!”*

In Scripture, it is very interesting to see the way God consistently unveils an evil scheme and not only brings it to calamity, but often times turns the evil of the scheme back on the schemer! This certainly happened to the evil man Haman who, in the days of Esther, plotted to kill all the Jews under King Ahasuerus' kingdom. We see God's faithfulness and power once again proven true to His chosen people in Esther 9:24–25:

*“For Haman ... the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them ... to disturb them and destroy them. But when it came to the king's attention, he commanded by letter that his wicked scheme, which he had devised against the Jews, **should return on his own head** and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.”*

This principle also rings true in the life of Jacob, whose very name means “schemer” or “supplanter.” He schemed against his brother Esau and his father Isaac to receive the inheritance of the firstborn. But not long after, he found himself the recipient of a “dirty trick”! After working seven years for the right to marry his beloved Rachel, he was given her dull-eyed sister Leah instead! When we sow in schemes, we also reap in schemes. Be careful how you sow!

As women living in this dangerous world, we must be vigilant to the schemes of the world and those living in it—whether they be schemes against our body, soul, or spirit. God’s Spirit living in us can be the watchtower of our lives. There is a simple color-code that we can look at to help us understand the vigilance with which we should live. It illustrates five levels of mental readiness. This mental readiness can and should be applied to both physical and spiritual dangers:

WHITE: APATHY. This is when we walk through life “asleep,” indifferent, and **unaware** of the dangers around us. See Ephesians 5:14—this is the state most people are in.

YELLOW: VIGILANCE. This color indicates we are **alert** and aware of potential danger, constantly ready to act if necessary. Luke 21:36 tells us, “*But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place ...*”

ORANGE: IDENTIFICATION. When a threat arises, the vigilant person will **identify** the threat and be prepared to take action. In 1 Peter 5:8–9, we are told to be alert to our “*adversary, the devil [for he] prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.*”

RED: ACTION. Respond to crisis by **taking action** to neutralize the danger. See Daniel 11:32b.

BLACK: PANIC. If we live in the apathy of condition white, then when danger occurs, we will fall into panic. See Saul’s army in 1 Samuel 17:24.

In the life of David’s daughter Tamar, we have a good illustration of how a scheme succeeded to do her both physical and emotional harm. In 2 Samuel 13, we read the story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. It is not a pretty passage of Scripture or a pleasant subject to discuss, but it has some good lessons for us—therefore, it is worth examining.

Tamar and Amnon had the same father, David, but different mothers. Amnon had an intense and improper lust for his half-sister Tamar, but no proper means to express it. So Amnon's "friend" Jonadab comes up with a scheme for Amnon to be alone with Tamar. Amnon agrees with the scheme and begins to put the evil plan into action. Tamar is oblivious to the approaching danger and finds herself in a rape situation from which she cannot escape. In the midst of it, she tries to reason with Amnon. Reason has no power against sexual aggression. We find in 2 Samuel 13:14–15 that Amnon completes the scheme and succeeds in raping his sister Tamar. Immediately, what he thought was love for her turns to hate. Illicit sex of any kind proves futile in fulfilling evil desires.

Obviously the failure here is on Amnon's part. Tamar would expect protection from her brother—not violence and abuse. Let's give consideration to what Tamar could have done differently. First, she was summoned to go to Amnon's house to prepare food. This, in itself, would have been out of the ordinary. Amnon was the son of the king and would have had his own servants to do such a thing. When Tamar was called for, it would have been a good time to go on the alert. Code **YELLOW!**

When the cakes were soon finished and ready to eat, Amnon instructed all the others present at the time to leave the house; he asked that only Tamar remain behind. Amnon is plotting to have privacy and time to get his way. It's time for Tamar to go to code **ORANGE**—and identify a possible threat. Instead, however, she allows the danger to go further. Amnon insists that she bring the food into his bedroom where he can eat from her hand; and when Tamar agrees with this request, her doom is sealed. Amnon has the time, the place, and the opportunity to commit rape. When Tamar finally came to code **RED** and wanted to take action, it was too late. Amnon had a firm grip on her, and his strength was more than she could overcome.

We see later in 1 Samuel 13:21 that David became angry when he heard of the rape of Tamar, but he took no action. Absalom,

however, vowed to himself to get revenge for his full-sister Tamar and plotted a way to kill Amnon. After two years of waiting, we see in 1 Samuel 13:28–29 that Absalom orchestrated a situation in which he could order his servants to complete the act of murder against his half-brother Amnon. As promised in the book of Micah, calamity came to Amnon as well because of the evil schemes which he plotted on his bed.

We learn from the painful events in Tamar’s life that we, as women, cannot always depend on others to protect us. My husband is a very “code **YELLOW**” kind of guy. He stays on the alert, is trained in defense of many kinds, and always has a weapon of some sort within reach. But I am not always with my husband. Often, he scolds me for not being more vigilant and prepared. As women, we sometimes find ourselves in situations that could very easily turn dangerous.

There are many things we can learn in the area of self-defense; and if you have not had any training in this area, I would encourage you to do so. But, by far, the most critical skill to employ is the skill of vigilance. Your mind is your primary weapon! Discipline yourself to live in code **YELLOW** at all times, so that when a danger is identified, you are prepared and ready to take the necessary action.

This “code **YELLOW**” principle applies in relationships with family and friends as well. In these close relationships, there can be disagreements and “blow ups” that occur whether it’s between husband and wife, mother and child, in-laws or “out-laws”! For the most part, our entire family (which now includes not only our own five children but three daughters-in-law, a son-in-law and grandchildren) gets along very well with each other. But even in the most compatible of families, there are times when tempers rise. I have learned over the years to observe “triggers” that are likely to lead to verbal battles, that can only end in hurt feelings and regret.

For instance, my husband and I work together very well on the mission field. We love travelling, teaching, and serving as a team. But I have found that if we are going to have any kind of disagreement or hard feelings, it will inevitably happen at the end of a mission trip.

Once we leave our place of service and head for the long trip home, we begin to crumble. Our bodies are tired, our minds are weary, and our patience is waning. The lines through security, cramped travel spaces, and frequent delays frustrate us. We just want to be home—now! Often, during this time, Satan tries to rob us of the joy of what God has done on the mission field. Having identified the pattern, I can then be more alert to the danger (“code **YELLOW**”) and humbly go before the Lord for His help in delivering us from this potential danger. In doing so, we avoid “code **BLACK**”—anger, resentment, and words that can’t be taken back.

Consider your relationships, especially the ones you highly value, and be alert to conditions that the enemy can use to hijack your joy in them.

Our Enemy—the Devil

Remember, the world is not our only enemy. We must also contend with the crafty schemes of the devil and his fallen angels. Sin entered the world through the fall of Adam; but long before that, sin entered the universe through the prideful fall of Satan (Isaiah 14:12–14). Since the beginning of the human race, he has been hatefully set on deceiving both believer and unbeliever. Deception is Satan’s area of expertise! The following verses warn us of his scheming, devouring nature and encourage us to fight him through trust in Jesus Christ:

- **Ephesians 6:11**, *“Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”*

- **1 Peter 5:8–9a**, “*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith ...*”
- **Ephesians 4:27**, “*Do not give the devil an opportunity.*”

There are five passages of Scripture that summarize the schemes of Satan against believers of the Church Age. By looking at them, it will help us to be aware of the nature of his schemes at all times:

1. Division, 2 Corinthians 2

This passage shows us that Satan schemes to **divide** congregations (and families) through a failure to love and forgive one another. Jesus is the Great Reconciler, Satan is the great divider. This scheme of Satan against the Corinthian church was resisted and overcome by applying a balance of love, discipline, and forgiveness.

2. Desertion, Job 1:21, 2:10

Satan’s plan here was to inflict enough suffering on Job that it would cause him to **desert** the God he served. Even Job’s wife followed the ploy of Satan and encouraged her husband to curse God because of his great suffering. Job overcame this evil scheme by a biblical orientation to suffering. Instead of deserting His Lord, he declared His faithfulness by saying, “*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!*” (Job 1:21b).

3. Denial, Matthew 26:31; Luke 22:31

As Jesus Christ went through the suffering of arrest and trial leading up to his crucifixion, Satan zeroed in on Peter and asked God if he could “*sift [him] as wheat.*” Satan’s plan against Peter was to discredit his love and devotion to Christ by tempting him to **deny** the very One he had been serving. His plan worked, but only for a short time. Peter did deny Christ three times before the cock crowed in the early morning. His failure, however, only caused him to love the Lord more fully and serve Him unto death.

From this painful episode in Peter's life, he learned a valuable lesson that he shares with us in 1 Peter 5:8–9, *“be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”* Peter had good reason, under the inspiration of God, to warn others to conquer where he had failed.

4. **Diversion, Matthew 4**

This is the chapter that records for us the temptations of Jesus Christ. We see that everything Satan tempted the Lord with were rightfully His, as the Son of God. But Satan tried to **divert** Jesus from receiving them in God's timing and in God's way. Satan offered him a shortcut: the crown without the cross, the glory without the suffering. We can learn from Christ's victories over temptations that we, too, can win against the devil when we properly apply God's Word. When tempted, the perfect Son of God relied on the perfect Word of God. We can too!

5. **Doubt, Genesis 3:1–7**

Satan tried to tempt Eve by causing her to doubt God and His goodness. Consider his tactics:

- He first implied that God was restricting her freedom and happiness with the words *“has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?”* But we know that God is generous and desires our freedom and happiness. He especially desires that we be free from the consequences of sin.
- Next, Satan implies that the consequences of disobeying God will surely not be as bad as God warned, for he said to the woman, *“You will not surely die!”* I wonder how long it took Eve to figure out that one bite of that illustrious fruit wasn't worth the consequences that it produced. Throughout Scripture, we are warned of the consequences of sin—do not doubt those warnings!

- Finally, Satan tried to imply to Eve that God was keeping her from something good. At times, we may also doubt God’s goodness in our life, but James 1:16–17 says, “*Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*” Do not doubt God; He does not withhold that which is good for His precious children.

Our Enemy—the Flesh

We have looked at the schemes of the world and the devil against us as believers in Jesus Christ. But our greatest enemy by far is the one that lives with us every minute of every day. Our own sin nature wages war against the desires of the Spirit, causing a daily conflict in our soul that must be understood and overcome by faith.

By looking at Genesis 3 and the fall of Adam and Eve, we can see some principles that help us to better understand our own sin nature and the schemes that it devises against us. In Genesis 3, Adam committed a blatant sin against the commands of the Lord. But by comparing 1 Timothy 2:14–15 with Genesis 3, we see that Eve was deceived by Satan and consequently led astray. Before the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect fellowship as “man and help-meet” as they walked together with the Lord in the Garden. But after the fall, the man is given rule over the woman as the weaker vessel.

- Genesis 3:16, “*To the woman He said: ‘I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’*” (NKJV)

God’s desire for the man and woman in the Garden is stated in Genesis 2:24–25 that they “*become one flesh,*” that they are

naked and unashamed before each other. This specifically relates to the sexual union, but would indicate a state of harmony and transparency of soul as well. However, after the fall, we have a new problem to deal with. The word “*desire*” is used in the same Hebrew syntax as in Genesis 4:7 where God tells Cain “*sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it*” (NKJV).

We see that the same struggle of the old sin nature against the soul is found in marriage. It is a struggle of the woman against her submissive role to her husband. As ladies, we don’t like being told such a thing; but when we look honestly at our own lives, we see the truth of God’s Word as it exposes the reality of this world. We must face it as it is. I have been at so many weddings where the principle of submission is included in the marriage ceremony, only to hear women afterward heatedly discussing how they will never submit to any man! They are sadly forfeiting their submission to God’s perfect plan and the beautiful role of the woman in it.

As believers in Jesus Christ, it is crucial for us to understand the inner schemes that we face daily as we struggle to be obedient to God’s Word. Consider these principles:

- Sin is always preceded by temptation, and the key to avoiding sin is dealing properly with the temptation. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, we are promised that we will experience “*no temptation*” greater than we can bear—God will always “*provide the way of escape*” from it. The question is, are we willing to take it? We have no excuses for our sin!
- Romans 13:14 tells us to “*put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh ...*” We must wear Jesus Christ like a robe around us and not create for ourselves an open door to sin.

- Job 31:1 gives us an interesting insight into temptation. In this verse, Job says *“I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?”* He indicates he has decided ahead of time, actually made a promise to himself, not to allow his eyes to “gaze.” He is wisely avoiding sin before it even begins! This principle is further explained in James 1:13–15 where the process of sin is described:

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”

The process described here is three-fold:

1. Temptation leads to lust (or the desire to pursue the temptation).
2. Lust, if acted upon or conceived, gives birth to sin.
3. Sin brings forth death (broken fellowship with God).

Recently, I had an opportunity to counsel a young, single mother who was distraught over a sexual temptation. She was crying and kept saying, “I don’t want to think this or do this, I am so ashamed of myself.” I explained to her that temptation itself is not the sin, but when we allow that temptation to be embraced mentally and/or acted upon, then the result is sin. There is a crucial moment in our soul where we must decide for or against the sin. That is where the battle is won or lost—in the choice to follow the sin nature or the Spirit of God (see Joshua 24:15)!

The following passages of Scripture set before us the choice of the flesh or the Spirit. These are the “no/yes” passages of the Bible. Take some time to look up these passages and consider what your daily decisions are:

- Galatians 5:16–23 **No** to the fruit of the flesh ...
Yes to the fruit of the Spirit
- Colossians 3:1–2 **No** to setting our mind on earthly things ...
Yes to setting our mind on heavenly things
- Colossians 3:8 **No** to the old self and its practice ...
Yes to the new self
- 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22 **No** to every form of evil ...
Yes to holding on to the good
- 1 Timothy 6:10–11 **No** to seeking after material wealth ...
Yes to wealth of soul
- 2 Timothy 2:22 **No** to youthful lusts ...
Yes to righteousness
- James 4:7 **No** to the devil ...
Yes to a life of submission to God!

If we desire to develop virtue and excellence in our life, we must develop the spiritual discipline of walking according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh. But remember, the promises of God always ring true and Romans 8:6 tells us *“the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”* Let us strive to say yes to the things of the Spirit of God, and reap the benefits of an abiding soul!

The virtuous woman must be vigilant to protect herself from the attacks of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Remember God’s faithfulness to us in this area, and consider these promises:

- **Psalm 23:1**, *“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”*
- **Psalm 91:1–4**, He is our *“shelter ... refuge ... fortress [and deliverer].”*
- **Isaiah 26:3**, *“The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You.”*
- **Psalm 18:3**, *“I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.”*

- **Psalm 121:7–8**, *“The LORD will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul. The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.”*

These are just a few of my favorites. Browse through the Psalms and see that the promises of God to us are too numerous to mention. He is our Fence, our Protection, and our Restraint. Live within the borders of His protection and enjoy victory over your enemies!

Lesson Eight: Relationship

*She senses that her gain
is good; her lamp does
not go out at night.*
Proverbs 31:18



Verse 18 starts with the Hebrew letter *teth*. *Teth* pictures **folded hands** and speaks of **relationship**.

*The woman of honor walks hand-in-hand
with Jesus Christ.*

Even though the “woman of honor” passage in Proverbs 31 is only 21 verses long, the word “*hand*” is used six times. This emphasizes the practical application of virtue to life. When virtue is residing in our heart, it is demonstrated in what we do. When a believing woman maintains a vital and growing relationship with her Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, that relationship will be demonstrated in life through love and service. In Proverbs 31:18, the woman is aware that her life has profit and benefit to others, and that awareness drives her to tireless service. What a joy when the love of Christ in our heart can serve and encourage others around us—from our husband, to our children, to neighbors, friends, and fellow members of the Body of Christ.

I think there is also an implication in this verse to the sexual relationship between a husband and wife. One of the things both a man and woman “*gain*” in marriage is a God-given sexual partner. Sexual satisfaction, in the context of marriage, is a blessing from God Himself. The relationship between a man and his wife can either enhance the marriage union or bring frustration and resentment. Wives often let their “*lamp ... go out at night*” by pouring themselves into the activities of the day; and when bedtime comes, there is no energy or desire left for her

husband. Obviously, there are times when this can't be avoided due to the stressful demands of career or family life. However, when this becomes the norm, it creates an unnecessary roadblock in any relationship.

When God brought the first man and woman together for the forming of “*one flesh*” (Gen 2:24), He designed them to enjoy a purpose, pleasure, and passion that is unique to the marriage relationship. Adam and Eve enjoyed an unashamed and transparent life together until ... the serpent slithered into their Garden, their souls, and their marriage. The crafty one achieved his evil goal, and their life was changed forever. In 1 Corinthians 7:2–5, Paul indicates that this is still the goal of our enemy—the devil—and he forewarns us of the danger:

“But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

This passage doesn't really need much explanation; the message is clear: don't let your lamp go out at night! Keep it burning and burning bright for the handsome gentleman you married. When you said those two little words, “I do,” you turned over the authority of your body to his sexual desires and he turned over the authority of his body to your sexual desires. The Lord is pleased when you enjoy, together, the beauty of your sexual relationship. Be ready to jump right in when a spontaneous spark occurs! But also take some thought to the planning of special times together. You and your husband will both be glad that you

did, and the memory of those times will be carried with you to the grave.

One of the things that makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside is to see an old couple walking along holding hands. It speaks volumes to me about the condition of their soul and their relationship—their past, and their future. Holding hands is the most basic physical expression of companionship, and yet, we don't hold hands with just anybody, right? We hold hands with those we have a comfortable relationship with, those we are dependent on, or those who are dependent on us or ... just those we want to walk through life with.

When our children and grandchildren come to our house for dinner, we begin with a “circle of love” in which we all hold hands together and begin with a thanksgiving prayer. The holding of hands symbolizes a joining together of two (or more) separate beings for the purpose of unity and fellowship.

I think God is saying something to us about relationship when He created even a tiny newborn baby with the ability to hold his mommy's and daddy's fingers. A baby can't walk, can't talk, can't sit or stand, he can't even roll over, but he can grasp a finger! He can wrap his tiny little hand around the finger of his mama in a newborn declaration of relationship and dependence. I think God must have programmed that ability into tiny, helpless little bodies as a picture of our need to reach out to an almighty, heavenly Father!

In Proverbs 31:18, the *teth* file pictures folded hands and speaks of relationship. The primary relationship of a woman of honor is the one she has with Jesus Christ. It is that relationship that makes the other relationships in her life shine! The Lord Jesus Christ left the glories of Heaven to come to Earth and sacrifice Himself on the cross to initiate a relationship with you and me.

In view of that sacrifice—the price tag He paid to redeem us—we should invest our lives in building and strengthening our

precious relationship with the Son of God. Yet, so often, we take this for granted, or place it so far back on our list of priorities that we have little left of time and energy to invest in knowing and serving Him. This verse encourages us to cherish the relationship we have with our Savior, and let it permeate into all that we think, say, and do for the glory of God. The goal of each day should be to walk with “folded hands” in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

It is very interesting to do a scriptural study of the hand of God, because you can tell a lot about a person by their hands! What the Bible has to say about the hand of God reveals to us a mighty, creative, and compassionate Lord:

- God’s hands created the universe, revealing to us the might, the power, and the creativity of our God. Have you ever stood on the edge of a vast ocean and considered that it was measured in the palm of God’s hand? Or stared into the infinite expanse of a starry night and considered it as the span of His hand?

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His Hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, And weighed the mountains in a balance And the hills in a pair of scales?” Isaiah 40:12

- The same divine hands that created the great expanse of the universe also created and formed us in our mother’s womb. His hands go from creating the vastness of space to weaving together the miniscule intricacy of the human form. He is the Potter and we are the clay; this speaks of intimacy, design, skill, purpose, and ownership. He created our unique physical body and breathed into it an eternal soul created to know, love, and serve Him.

“For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb.” Psalm 139:13

See also Isaiah 64:8; Isaiah 44:2, 24.

- The work of His hands is meant to cause rejoicing and celebration in our hearts. His are the hands of the most accomplished artist ever, demonstrated in the brilliance of a sunrise, the smile of a child, and the velvety softness of a rose. Consider this verse in relation to those around you—each and every one created by the hand of God. Rejoice in them as well, whether you like them or not!

*“For You, O LORD, have made me glad by what
You have done, I will sing for joy at the works of
Your hands.”* Psalm 92:4

At the incarnation, these same mighty hands humbled themselves to take on the form of a helpless babe (John 1:1–3, 14). Jesus’ hands would have gripped Mary’s hand as He learned to stand, to toddle, and to walk. As a young boy, His hands gripped the scrolls of Scripture even as His heart gripped the unchanging truth they contained.

Joseph trained the hands of Jesus to hold the tools of a carpenter and work through the heat of the day to help support the family. In this way, His hands identified with common man and the menial demands of life on earth. As Jesus grew into manhood, His hands became the hands of a Healer as He mixed spit and clay to bring sight to the blind. His were the hands of a Servant as He held a little boy’s meager lunch and multiplied it into enough to feed thousands. The humble hands of Jesus reached out to the poor and the sick, and welcomed the little children.

When a woman was thrown at the feet of Jesus after being caught in adultery, His hand wrote a message in the dirt—a message that condemned the religious Jews but gave hope to the hopeless. His hands were lifted in prayer in the Garden and then surrendered to arrest for the purpose of fulfilling God’s perfect plan. They lay idly by His side as He was beaten, scourged, and mocked, until finally, His mighty, yet humble hands were destined for

crucifixion and pierced through on the cross of Golgotha. The hands of the great Creator were nailed to a tree that He Himself created. His are the hands of forgiveness.

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, a bond of two hands is formed. Ephesians 2:8–9 says, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Grace is the hand of God reaching out to sinful man; faith is the hand of man reaching out to Holy God. Once these hands are joined together, nothing can pull them apart (John 10:28). Each and every day we breathe as children of God on this earth, the hands of God are working in our lives:

- **They are the hands of a faithful God.** Therefore, we can trust His hands.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands.”

Isaiah 49:15–16a

- **They are the hands of a helping God.** Therefore, we can rely on His hands.

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear.”

Isaiah 59:1

- **They are hands of protection.** Therefore, we can rest in His hands.

“In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver.”

Isaiah 49:2b

- **They are hands of pleasure.** God bestows His pleasure to us in both time and eternity. When you enjoy any valid pleasure on the face of this earth, consider it as coming from the hand of God. And these are as nothing compared to the pleasures that await us in eternity!

“You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” Psalm 16:11

- **They are the hands of a friend and a guide.**

“The steps of a man are established by the LORD, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong, because the LORD is the One who holds his hand.” Psalm 37:23–24

- **They are eternal hands.** When Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world, He was then ready to leave this Earth and return to His place of glory in Heaven. In Luke 23:46, He said, *“Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.”* If Jesus could commit His spirit into the hands of the heavenly Father, then we too can rest assured that as we pass from time into eternity, the same Father will receive our spirit into His hands.

These verses are full of assurance to us as children of God—established and upheld by a faithful God. This brings us right back to the *teth* file—the folding of hands for relationship and companionship. To sum it all up, God is there for us—all the time! The mighty and humble hand of God holds our helpless little hand through the ups and downs of life. Thank you, Jesus!

My husband and I just celebrated 41 years of marriage—by the grace of God. I love life with Gene Cunningham! We have a joy-filled marriage in which we live, love, and serve together for the glory of God. But this hasn’t always been the case. We have

arrived at this point by working through many shortcomings, sins, misunderstandings, trials, and heartbreak.

I remember a time as a young woman when we were in the middle of a very dark and trying time, and my hope for a happy future was waning. Many people were giving me contradictory counsel, which only added to my confusion. Then, some dear soul wrote me a letter of encouragement in which they said, “Fall in love with Jesus Christ!” I had been a Christian for more than 10 years, sat through a multitude of Bible classes, had notebooks full of doctrine, and a heart full of despair.

When the challenge of that letter hit the core of my heart, it changed my perspective. I began to look at the Bible as a love letter from the great Lover of my soul—One who lived and died to redeem me from sin, depression, and despair. I began to take it all personally! The trying circumstances of my life were not immediately changed, but my countenance was—simply by falling in love with Jesus Christ. He is our heavenly Bridegroom, waiting with an anxious heart to return for His Bride; His loving-kindness is renewed every morning, His love is faithful and forgives a multitude of sins. His love changes everything!

In 1 John 4:19, Scripture says, “*we love because He first loved us.*” Throughout the years and the yearnings of our life, Jesus is working to make our love for Him warmer, deeper, and stronger. Next to our relationship with Jesus Christ, the most fulfilling relationship on Earth is designed to be marriage. We should be joined together body (sexually), soul (friendship, communication, value for one another), and spirit (fellowship with our partner around the Person of Jesus Christ). We all desire this marital fulfillment, but very often it eludes us.

As we have already discussed, our adversary, the devil, seeks to destroy marriages and nullify the great ministry and joy that a man and woman can have in serving the Lord together. In addition to his attacks, we often enter into marriage with unrealistic expectations, thinking that once we find the “right

man,” all will be right. And then, all goes wrong! Or at least, some things go wrong.

After marriage, the “veil” of love sometimes falls to the ground and exposes the fact that our “right man” is only human (as are we!), with flaws in his armor. Some may be small and easily overlooked; others may be glaring. If we are dependent on our husband’s “rightness” to give us fulfillment, we can sometimes feel quite empty. If we are dependent on our heavenly Husband’s “rightness” to fulfill us, we can be quite full—full of the love of Christ that can then overflow into our marriage relationship and make it warmer, deeper, and stronger! The best thing we can do to enhance our marriage is to fall in love with Jesus Christ!

In Ephesians 5:25–30, the husband is told to love his wife in the same way that Christ loves the Church. The love of Christ is a perfect, selfless love, so that is a pretty big charge given to the husband. It takes time, spiritual growth, and commitment on the part of the husband to learn to love in that way. As women, we need to remember that when our husband fails to love us with the love of Christ—Jesus does, all the time!

Let’s consider some common disappointments in a love relationship between a man and wife and how Jesus fills those needs when our husband does not:

- **Rejection.** Sometimes a wife can feel rejected by her husband, but the Lord never rejects us. Consider Isaiah 54:5–6:

“For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth. ‘For the LORD has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected,’ says your God.”

- **Unloving.** At times a husband can seem anything but loving to his wife. As a matter of fact, I would venture to say that most young married women constantly question whether or not their husband really loves them. In contrast, the love of Jesus Christ is unconditional and should never be questioned. In Psalm 136, it is stated 26 times in 26 verses *“His lovingkindness is everlasting!”* Micah 7:18 tells us that the Lord *“delights in unchanging love.”* And this is my favorite: Isaiah 54:10 says, *“‘For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken,’ says the LORD who has compassion on you.”*

See also John 3:16; 15:13; Romans 5:8.

- **Inattentiveness.** In marriage, the man and the woman both have a variety of physical, sexual, and soul needs. At times, the husband can be so caught up in work, career, sports, hobbies, or some other distraction in life that he is inattentive to the legitimate needs of his wife. But Jesus Christ knows our thoughts, our needs, the longings and desires of our heart. He is attentive to those needs in His timing and in His way—the way that is best for us. Consider 1 Peter 3:12, *“FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS, AND HIS EARS ATTEND TO THEIR PRAYER.”*
- **Unfaithfulness.** This is one of the hardest blows to any marriage. If a husband is unfaithful, whether it be in thought or in deed, it kicks a woman squarely in the guts. This unfaithfulness can be in the area of pornography, serious flirting with another woman, or actual adultery. We aren’t going to cover the complexities of this issue at this point, but when unfaithfulness occurs, the wife needs to remember the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and fall back on Him. *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself,”* 2 Timothy 2:13.

- **Unforgiving Attitude, Imputing of Shame and Guilt.** If there has been fault on the part of the wife, whether real or imagined, the husband will sometimes be unwilling to forgive, and yoke the wife with shame and guilt. But the Lord forgives all of our sins and frees us from the accompanying guilt and shame. There may be condemnation from the husband—but not from Christ:

“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” Romans 8:1–2

- **Lack of Provision.** Traditionally, the man has been the main provider of income in the marriage and home. Of course, this tradition has changed somewhat in our society today, as more and more homes are running on two incomes. But if a husband is unwilling or unable to work, it can dump a huge burden of worry and concern onto the woman’s shoulders. In such a situation, the wife must remember that, ultimately, all supply comes from our Lord who has promised to *“supply all our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus,”* Philippians 4:19.

It was not always easy for my husband and me to raise five children on a pastor’s income, yet I have so many stories of God’s faithfulness to supply for us in the middle of lack that they could cover the pages of this little book. I concur with David wholeheartedly when he said, *“I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken”* (Psalm 37:25). In addition to trusting God to supply our needs, He is ready and able to carry the burden of that need in order to free our hearts from the sin of worry.

- **Lack of Protection.** In a marriage relationship, the man is intended to be the protector of the woman. Some men

are willing, trained, and prepared to protect their wife and family, even to the point of death—but some are not. This can leave the wife feeling very vulnerable in today’s world. Thankfully, we have a Lord who is our refuge and shelter from the dangers of this life.

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread?” Psalm 27:1

- **Lack of Spiritual Leadership.** The man is designed by God to be the spiritual leader in the home—his wife and children being his “flock.” But few husbands actually fill this role on a consistent basis. When Christ left this earth, He took time to assure the disciples that He was not leaving them alone, for the Helper—the Spirit of God—would be sent to minister to their souls (John 14:26). The Spirit of God is our spiritual leader, ministering to us through teaching, conviction, encouragement, and fruitfulness.
- **Abuse: Physical, Verbal, or Emotional.** Sometimes men can have a lot of pent-up anger. When a husband does not properly deal with his anger, it will most likely erupt toward his wife and family. When I am teaching in third-world countries, one of the most frequently asked questions is from women who don’t know how to biblically deal with abuse from their husbands. But physical, verbal, and/or emotional abuse is prevalent in America as well.

If abuse from the husband is violent and endangers the safety of the wife and/or children, it is best for the wife to remove herself from that abuse. God didn’t design a wife to be a punching bag, but often anger takes the form of shouting, rude criticism, intimidation, or manipulation. It isn’t enough to leave home over, but it isn’t very pleasant either. Once again, we fall back to the love of Christ.

Someday I would like to write a book that studies all of the places in Scripture where Jesus personally dealt with women. I think I would call it *The Gentleman Jesus*. He always displayed kindness and compassion to every woman He met, treating them with honor and respect. His gentlemanly character remains today!

- **The Little Things.** Have you ever said to yourself, “He’s just driving me crazy!” Every person has personality quirks that can sometimes wear us out. It seems a man knows how to lift up the toilet seat but not put it down, open a closet door but not shut it, get the sandwich stuff out of the fridge but not put it back. “Rewind” doesn’t seem to be a part of their mentality unless it’s associated with a DVD player!

This may not describe your husband, but some other incomprehensible behavior probably would. The point is that we all get irritated at times by the little things in life that drive us crazy. And we all irritate others in the same way, if not worse! Like tiny termites that eat away at the strength of a structure, these little irritations can eat away at the strength of our relationships. What is the solution? Again, we are delivered through the love of Christ. Treat your husband as you would want him to treat you, with patience, tolerance, and a love that looks beyond the munching termites!

To sum it all up, Jesus Christ is the perfect man! Psalm 37:4 says:

“Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

When we delight in our relationship with Him above all else, He is there to fill the deep-down desires of our heart, something that no other person or thing is able to do.

Occasionally, I like to read through the Song of Solomon. It is a very beautiful and descriptive account of a passionate romance between Solomon and his young Shulammitite bride. When I read through it, I like to put the Lord Jesus Christ in the place of Solomon and myself in the place of the Shulammitite bride.

As I journey through the verses, I like to compare what is being said in the Song of Solomon with other passages that speak of the love of Christ for me. For instance, in Song of Solomon 2:14 it says, *“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret place of the steep pathway, let me see your form, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your form is lovely.”* This speaks of the desire Solomon has to hear the voice of his beloved and enter into intimate communication with her. This compares to the desire that Jesus Christ has for us to come boldly before His throne, to find joy in prayer and to pray without ceasing (Hebrews 4:16; Isaiah 56:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

As the Lover of my soul, Jesus Christ always has time to listen and is attentive to my prayer. I would challenge you to read through Song of Solomon and meditate on the passionate expression of love, liken it to your relationship with Jesus Christ, and be romantically wooed by the Son of God. The summary of Song of Solomon is found in Song of Solomon 2:16, *“My beloved is mine, and I am his.”* Jesus Christ has redeemed me for Himself; He is mine and I am His. What else do we really need?

Ladies, if you are single, falling in love with Jesus Christ will keep you in His arms until the day you wed the one He has for you. It will teach you much about relationships and prepare you for truly loving another. If you are married, developing a love relationship with Jesus Christ will bring a softness and grace to your marriage that could not be there otherwise. It will teach you to fall back on Christ in the disappointments and hard times. If you are widowed or divorced, it will help to fill the pain and loneliness that comes from losing the one you love.

Before we leave this lesson on building a love relationship with Jesus Christ, I want to consider the flip side of what we have learned. So far, we have pondered the love of Christ for us, and how clinging to that love can shelter us in the disappointments of life and help us to live a more fulfilled life. After all, every woman wants to “be in love”!

We have focused mainly on latching on to the love of Christ for ourselves. But the love of Christ also comes with responsibilities, and these are penned for us in 2 Corinthians 5:14–17:

“For the love of Christ controls us [meaning to compel, to drive forth under pressure], having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him this way no longer. Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

The beautiful, faithful, passionate love of Christ is meant to transform the motivation of our life. What a blessing God bestows upon us when He gives us something greater to live for than ourselves. As our friend Gary Horton often says, *“If you are all wrapped up in yourself, you are the smallest package on earth.”*

With the love of Christ compelling us, we can live for Him. And in living for Him, we can live for others—especially our husbands! The compelling love of Christ enables us to see others not as they are in the flesh: fallen, sinful, and without hope or value. It enables us, instead, to see them as an object of Christ’s

eternal love: one who Christ died for, and one who Christ exalts to a place of honor.

It is my hope and prayer that the controlling love of Christ will be so forceful in our lives that it will enable each of us to love our husbands with the heart of Jesus Christ.

Imagine the joy of a woman who is walking in a folded-hand relationship with Jesus on her right side and a folded-hand relationship with her husband on the other side—both hands braided together with the hands of the ones we love!

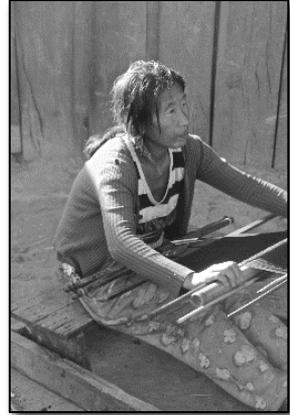
Lesson Nine: Abiding

*“She stretches out her hands
to the distaff, and her hands
grasp the spindle.”*

Proverbs 31:19



Verse 19 starts with the Hebrew letter *yodh*. *Yodh* pictures a **cupped hand** that is ready to reach out and work, and speaks of **productive labor**.



*The woman of honor abides in Christ
and bears much fruit.*

I find that no matter where I am in the world, the women are always working. As the old saying goes, “A man may work from sun to sun, but a woman’s work is never done!”

Interestingly enough, I am writing this particular lesson from a small village in the mountains of Nagaland. At five o’clock this morning, the women who are hosting us were up to start the fire, boil water for washing, fix tea and coffee for drinking, and cook food over the fire to feed about 14 people. After we departed to go teach at the church, they began to wash the dishes with water from the well. Then, they set out to do the laundry in a bucket, scrub the clothes with a brush, and hang them out to dry. After sweeping the floor, bringing in more firewood, killing a chicken, and picking rocks out of the rice, it was time to start on lunch. Once again, it meant getting the fire going and cooking 5–6 dishes to feed the same 14 people. And this only brings us to midday!

While these women were working to care for us, other women were gathered together to prepare large pots (I mean REALLY large pots) of rice, beans, meat, and curry, cooked over a fire in

the church kitchen. At the finish of today's Vacation Bible School in Chessor Village, they fed 600 hungry little children! As we sometimes stroll through the village on our time off, we see women everywhere working and serving their families.

The picture above of the woman weaving was taken here in Nagaland where the women still weave shawls and blankets on a handloom according to the pattern of their tribe. Their hands still stretch out "to the distaff and grasp the spindle." Life here is basic and the people struggle to make a living out of the land around them. They all desire, as we do, to raise healthy babies into adulthood and see their children be prospered and blessed by God, to see their lives be worthwhile and count for eternity. But all of that requires a cupped hand—one that is ready to serve and ready to work.

So what's my point? As women, life involves work: hard work, mundane and repetitious work, work that seldom brings a thank you or words of appreciation.

A good illustration of this is Thanksgiving Dinner. It can take hours or even days to prepare. Everyone gathers together, the table is set, prayers of thanks are offered to God, and the family digs in. Thirty minutes later, the meal is gone. Hours of preparation are devoured in a matter of minutes and all that's left is the dirty dishes—more work! Don't get me wrong, I love Thanksgiving; but I have always been amazed at how long it can take to prepare the meal and how quickly it is over. Work is a result of the fall and the curse that God placed on man and Earth. But God, in His grace, turns that cursing into an opportunity for blessing and eternal reward. Proverbs 31:19 encourages us to serve in such a way as to be a blessing to others and bring honor and glory to God. If we have to work anyway, why not do it in such a way that has eternal value and glorifies our Father in Heaven?

John 15 is part of the Upper Room Discourse. In it, Jesus was giving His disciples valuable instruction shortly before His

crucifixion and His resurrection to the right hand of God the Father. In style that is typical of Jesus Christ, He taught from the world around Him and used the vineyard—something very familiar to the disciples—as a visual aid for a Bible class on divine production. He said to the disciples:

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:1–5

The humility of Jesus Christ is apparent in all that He says and does, from His humble birth in a stable to His sacrificial death on the cross—and everything in between. Here, He once again displays His humility by likening Himself to a simple earthly vine—the King of kings and Lord of lords planted in the ground to give life to the branches.

The heavenly Father, being the Vinedresser, is in charge of the pruning and training of the branches in order to bring the most fruit from His precious vineyard. John 15:2 says, *“Every branch ... that does not bear fruit, He takes away ...”* Many people use this passage to say that if we do not bear fruit, we have lost our salvation. This is an incorrect understanding of the passage! The Greek word for *“takes away”* actually means *“to raise, to lift up.”*

If a branch is growing too close to the ground, the vinedresser will lift up that branch so that it can grow toward the light and be fruitful. If we, as believers, are living too close to the world and are overcome by *“the lust of the flesh ... the lust of the eyes and*

the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16), our heavenly Father will bring discipline into our life to draw us away from the world toward the light of Jesus Christ. Why? Because our divine Vinedresser loves us and wants us to bear fruit.

John 15:2 also says, “*every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.*” In horticulture, the purpose of pruning is to remove anything that is unnecessary to the health and production of the plant. Pruning purges the plant of that which is unfruitful in order to bring more fruit. Just as a vinedresser prunes and cares for his vineyard to bring the most production he can per square acre, our heavenly Vinedresser works in our life to bring ever-increasing fruit. Thankfully, the Father loves us too much to leave us where we now are in our Christian life. Even when we are abiding, serving, and bearing fruit, He wants more from our life—He wants greater production. In His faithfulness, He brings pruning in the form of tests, trials, and difficulties in order to purge or prune us of that which is unfruitful. When we surrender to His expertise, He is able to bring forth more fruit. Pruning hurts, but it is very profitable to our Christian life.

In John 15:3–4, we are reminded that we must be abiding in Christ in order to bear true fruit. Just as the vine is the source of supply for the branches, so is the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word the source of supply for true fruit in our Christian life. Apart from Him, we cannot bear fruit worthy of blessing in time and reward in eternity. But when we abide in Him, we have the promise of more fruit; and Jesus Christ is faithful to His promises.

So, what does it mean to abide? The word “*abide*” is the Greek word *meno*, meaning “to stay in a given state, place or relationship, to dwell, to remain, to endure.” This pictures the branch being “at home” in the vine. Home is where we find our rest and refreshment, where we abide in order to be ready to then go out to work and be productive. Christ is encouraging us to remain in a place of fellowship with Him, that He may be the source of our love, strength, wisdom, and fruit. The more we

abide, the greater the bearing of fruit in our life. John 15:8 confirms to us that the Father is glorified when we bear much fruit!

In John 15:9–15, we are commanded to abide in the love of Christ, to keep His commandments, and to love others as He has loved us. With these commandments come the promise of joy, answered prayer, and friendship with Him. And then, in John 15:16, Jesus says, “... *I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain ...*”

From John 15:1–16, we see that consistent abiding brings a progression of fruit bearing, from simply “*fruit*” to “*more fruit*” to “*fruit [that] would remain.*” What an amazing promise that we, as branches in the vine, have the potential to live and serve in such a way that the spiritual fruit of our life lives beyond our earthly years and reaches into eternity!

From time to time, we work in remote areas where pioneer missionaries labored in difficult and sometimes life-threatening conditions to bring the Gospel to unsaved souls. These sacrificial servants of God have long ago passed from the face of this Earth. But as we live and work among the Christians of the area, we see the fruit of those missionaries’ labors, we see fruit that remains, and fruit that has multiplied to outlive their time here on Earth. That encourages me. “*Fruit [that] would remain*” comes in many other forms as well, as we pass on a spiritual heritage to children and grandchildren. The heavenly Vinedresser is able to bring forth fruit in their lives from the seeds we have planted.

When I was in the 7th grade, a successful businessman visited our homeroom class. He was there to impart to us the secret of finding success in business. The man put some blank lines on the chalkboard (like a hangman game) and asked us to guess the letters. We took turns suggesting letters that would be found in the secret sentence until we had spelled out the words “FIND A NEED AND FILL IT.” Find a need, and fill it: this was his secret of success in business. And it makes sense, doesn’t it? I don’t

remember being interested in being a successful businesswoman at the age of 12, yet God etched that sentence into my brain to be of use to me later in life. To find a need and fill it is not only the secret to success in business, but more importantly, it is the secret to finding the area of ministry that God has for each one of us. Look around you, find a need, and do what you can to fill it! God often opens the eyes of His children to see the specific needs that He desires them to fill.

In Acts 9:36–42, we find the story of a woman who found a need and filled it. Her name is Tabitha (in the Greek, Dorcas). God opened Tabitha’s eyes to the need of the poor widows around her. Probably many women were aware of the existence of poor widows in Joppa, but Tabitha was the one who decided to do something to relieve their poverty and suffering. She took it upon herself to fill a need in their lives.

With compassion in her heart, she reached out her hand to the distaff and the spindle, and she sewed clothes for the widows. Her work was sewing, but her ministry was encouragement! Sewing brings sore fingers and an aching back; encouraging others brings refreshment, blessing, and fruit! The women were so encouraged by Tabitha’s ministry to them that when she became sick and died, they wept tears of grief at the thought of losing their dear friend.

When Tabitha died, Peter was in a nearby town so they sent for him. When he arrived at Tabitha’s home, he sent the others out of the room where the dead woman lay, then knelt down and prayed. He turned to her and said, “*Tabitha, arise*” (Acts 9:40). Tabitha opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. Then, he called the widows and saints back into the room and presented her alive! In Acts 9:42, the record states, “*It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.*”

Tabitha’s story illustrates for us the fruit of abiding in Christ and serving with cupped hand. The clothing and encouragement she gave to the widows was her evident “*fruit.*” From her death and

resuscitation, God brought forth “*more fruit*” as many believed in His Name. Today, 2,000 years later, the record of Tabitha’s cupped hand encourages all of us—this is “fruit that remains.” My favorite part of Tabitha’s story is found in Acts 9:36b, where the Spirit of God chose to summarize Tabitha’s life in one simple sentence, “*this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did.*” Can you imagine the joy of being promoted from this Earth to eternity, seeing Jesus Christ face-to-face, and having Him summarize your life in such a way? If an eternal sentence was written about your life and mine, how would it read? That is a question we need to prayerfully consider!

Years ago there was an elderly lady from Oklahoma who used to sit and make crocheted bookmark crosses and then send them to us. We would save them up, and when we went on a mission trip abroad, we would bring them and give them as gifts to the pastors and their wives. You can’t imagine the smiles on their faces when they received something as small as a crocheted cross. One lady, who was in her forties, came up and hugged me afterwards and said, “This is the first gift I have been given in my whole life; I will keep it forever!” The cupped hand of a lady in Oklahoma blessed the hearts of brothers and sisters across the globe.

There are so many needs in the world around us. Missionaries need prayer, support, and encouragement. Young mothers need a break, someone to watch a child for a short time, help with house-cleaning, cooking, or shopping. Elderly people in nursing homes are dying for someone to hold their hand, read to them, or just be a friend. Pastors are often overburdened with work in the church that really should be willingly taken on by members of the flock, but people rarely step forward. Churches need cleaning, grounds need mowing, Sunday school classes need teachers, sick people need to be visited, and the suffering need to be encouraged. Need I go on? Our modern society emphasizes recreation over work, income over fulfillment, and comfort over challenge. We have become soft. Even in our Christian life, we have become soft. Find a need and fill it!

I want to say a word to young mothers. Sometimes when our babies are young and needy and our family is growing, there is little time left in life to serve beyond the walls of our own home. We may see needs in the lives of others around us but are limited in our ability to meet those needs because of domestic demands. At this point, I wish I were looking young mothers in the eyes and hugging their beautiful hearts rather than writing words on a page, because I feel so passionate about this principle. If you have a baby in your arms, a small hand clinging to yours, a little life underfoot, you have found your work and you have found your ministry—at least for now! They won't be little forever. Let your cupped hand reach out to minister the love of Christ to your children's needs, day in and day out. You are the only one who can be a mother to them—no one else can take your place and that place is precious in the sight of God!

The world is so cruel and demeaning to stay-at-home mothers when it implies that they are missing out on true fulfillment by dedicating themselves to child raising. Don't buy into that lie! Young mothers are missionaries, with their children as their mission field! It was the Lord Jesus Christ who said in Matthew 10:42, "*And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward.*" If you ask me, His words indicate that caring for children with the love of Christ is a pretty high calling in life—one worthy of eternal reward.

I want to close this section with what I consider to be one of the most encouraging statements in the Bible. In Mark 14, Mary of Bethany has just poured out her heart and treasure on the head and feet of Jesus to anoint Him beforehand for His burial. Others were in the room to observe this sacrificial act of worship, but because of the hardness of their hearts, they were not impressed with Mary's offering.

Instead, they expressed indignation at what they considered to be a great waste of resources. Jesus, however, rebuked them for their criticism. He considered Mary's offering as a "*good deed,*" worthy of praise (Mark 14:6). And then in Mark 14:8, He said of

Mary, “*she has done what she could.*” These six small words speak volumes about the divine price tag Jesus puts on our service to Him.

God has given us all a different portion of time, energy, gifts, skills, and resources that we can dedicate to Him. Jesus doesn’t ask us to do everything. He only asks us to do what we can to reach out to the world with cupped hand, and let the almighty Vinedresser bring forth fruit from our life. Thomas Carlyle said, “*Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness.*”

There is a distaff and spindle in your life that God wants you to reach out and grasp for His honor and glory!

Lesson Ten: Compassion

*“She extends her hand to
the poor; and she stretches out her
hands to the needy.”*

Proverbs 31:20



Verse 20 starts with the Hebrew letter *caph*. *Caph* pictures an **open hand** and speaks of **giving and sharing**.

*The woman of honor has a heart
of compassion and hands that care.*

Our heavenly Father is a loving God, and His love is demonstrated to a fallen world through the indescribable gift of Jesus Christ. *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). God the Father gave His only precious Son to all who would reach out with an open heart and trust in Him for salvation. On the cross, Christ demonstrated His love by giving His life as a payment for your sin and mine.

We are reminded in Ephesians 1:7–8 that our redemption is through His blood, *“according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished on us.”* Jesus Christ, in buying our redemption through *“the riches of His grace,”* not only delivered us from eternal separation in the Lake of Fire and all of the eternal torture that comes with the penalty of sin, but He lavishes His grace on us in this life as well. We live as guests on the Earth, served daily by His grace—even in times of trial. The giving of the priceless gifts of God, both physical and spiritual, calls us to be a channel of blessing to those around us.

Billy Graham is credited for saying, *“God has given us two hands—one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not*

cisterns made for hoarding, we are channels made for sharing.”

I have often used that quote, and the picture it brings to mind, in teaching women and children around the world, for it is a simple illustration of God’s plan of grace. With one hand, we reach out to Him: a needy child to a faithful Father, receiving the abundance of grace that He gives us (in both spiritual and physical ways). With the other hand, we reach out and share with others what He has freely given. In this way, we become a channel of the lavish grace of God.

In Isaiah 58, God told Isaiah to rebuke the children of Israel for their sins. They are worshipping God in action—but not in heart. Isaiah 58:3 begins a conversation between God and Israel. Israel asks:

“Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not take notice?”

They are accusing God of being distant and having no regard for their sacrifice. The Lord deals with their accusation by summarizing their sins. He says, in the midst of their fast, which is designed to humble their hearts and bring them closer to Him, that they are still seeking their own pleasure. They fast with contention in their heart, the shaking of fists, and for others to see. God says this is **not** the *“fast ... which I choose”* (Isaiah 58:6). In other words, He has no regard for their fast because it is for their own glorification and not His.

In Isaiah 58:6–7, God describes the fast that He **does** choose to have regard for—the fast that He notices and is pleased with:

“Is this not the fast that I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into the

house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

There is a time and place in our Christian life for fasting from food for the purpose of humbling the heart and spending uninterrupted time in prayer. The hunger reminds us of our human frailty and dependence on God, as well as freeing up time to spend in prayer. But the fast that God speaks of in Isaiah 58:6–7 is not a fast from food, drink, or other earthly pleasure. It is a fast from a self-centered life coming from the heart of a believer who desires to live life as a channel of blessing rather than a cistern for hoarding! These verses speak of fasting from self in order to meet the spiritual and physical needs of those around us. With this, God is pleased.

We live in a world that is chained in the darkness of sin and deception. There is such a void of spiritual life in the world today as we plunge deeper and deeper into the pit of materialism, and think less and less of our Creator. As well, there is a global uprising of both false religion and atheistic living. The world is bound in wickedness and yoked with lies. In addition to the spiritual needs of the world, there are true physical needs—as Jesus said, “*you always have the poor with you*” (Mark 14:7; John 12:8).

After Isaiah 58 describes the fast that pleases God, it describes the life of a person who is willing to minister to the needs of others. Isaiah 58:8–12 outlines for us ten blessings that come to the believer who fasts from a self-centered life. Remember, what God did in the literal, physical sense for Israel, He does in the spiritual sense for us who are living in the Church Age:

1. ***“Then your light will break out like the dawn”*** (Isaiah 58:8). Jesus is *“the light of the world”* (John 8:12; 9:5). When we follow in the footsteps of Jesus by fasting from a self-centered life, Jesus is the Light of our life that breaks forth out of our heart like the dawn. Isn’t the sunrise a beautiful and radiant thing? How much more beautiful is the light of the love of Christ rising up in a believer’s heart!

2. ***“And your recovery will speedily come forth”*** (Isaiah 58:8). This is a promise of healing and spiritual restoration. When we focus on the needs of others, our own hurts and needs often shrink in comparison. Getting our eyes off self and on to God and others begins the healing process.
3. ***“And your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard”*** (Isaiah 58:8). Just as the pillar of cloud and fire went before and behind the people of Israel, the Lord gives His protection to His servants. Psalm 41:1 says, *“How blessed is he who considers the helpless; the LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble.”*
4. ***“Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am’”*** (Isaiah 58:9). This is a promise of answered prayer. When we fast from a self-centered life, our prayers will not be self-centered, they will be prayers focused on His will. This is the prayer God promises to answer. This coincides with the New Testament promise in John 14:14, *“If you ask anything in My Name, I will do it.”*
5. ***“And if you give yourself to the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness, and your gloom will become like midday”*** (Isaiah 58:10). This verse speaks of joy in the midst of trial and hardship. It reminds me of Paul and Silas being physically restrained in prison but free to sing praises to God (Acts 16)! Notice that God is not promising freedom from trial, but joy in the midst of it. See also James 1:2–5.
6. ***“And the LORD will continually guide you”*** (Isaiah 58:11). Here is a promise of divine guidance to those who fast from a self-centered life. Divine guidance in life seems to be one of the things that believers struggle with the most. But if God intends to use us to meet the physical and spiritual needs of others, and we are mindful of

meeting those needs, it will be fairly clear in most situations of our life what we are to do and where we are to go.

7. ***“And satisfy your desire in scorched places”*** (Isaiah 58:11). The words *“satisfy”* and *“scorched places”* don’t seem to belong together in the same sentence, do they? When the riches of this world surround us, say in a shopping mall in the USA, we often feel a desperate dissatisfaction because our eyes are attracted to so much we can’t afford. In contrast, some of my most contented moments in life have been in a bamboo church in the middle of nowhere sharing the Gospel with little children. At those moments, I feel a divine satisfaction in the midst of a “scorched place”! The soul-fast of Isaiah 58:6 results in the soul-feast in this verse. Satisfaction comes not from our surroundings, but from our Savior!
8. ***“And give strength to your bones”*** (Isaiah 58:11). Your bones are the support structure of your body—the very core of your stature. God promises strength to those who are in service to Him. Some of the most energetic people I have ever known are “on a mission from God.”
9. ***“And you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail”*** (Isaiah 58:11). A watered garden brings forth a harvest, and a spring of water brings forth life. So does a fast from a self-centered life. John 15:5 says, “... *he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.*” How sad it would be to depart this life without bearing eternal spiritual fruit!
10. ***“Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell”*** (Isaiah 58:12). This is perhaps the most powerful promise of all. It speaks of God using

us to rebuild lives and relationships, and to give hope to future generations. Just as Ezra and Nehemiah were used by God to rebuild and restore Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon, God can use each one of us to restore and rebuild lives, marriages, churches, and even nations. Much spiritual ground has been lost in Western culture over the last century. If only the present-day Body of Christ could focus less on self and more on the physical and spiritual needs of others, perhaps some of that ground could be reclaimed!

These principles are seen to be true in the real life story of Ruth. As she set aside her own life and interests to minister to Naomi, God brought healing to her heart and purpose to her life. God guided her to Boaz's field where she was given protection and abundant supply. He strengthened her bones to serve Naomi by gleaning in the fields for many long weeks. As Ruth and Naomi began to see God's supply and help in their life, it brought light and hope to their hearts—even though they were living in a time of loss, poverty, and affliction.

Boaz recognized Ruth as a "*virtuous woman*" (Ruth 3:11, NKJV) ("*woman of excellence*," NASB), and stepped forward as the kinsman-redeemer to marry her. God then opened her womb to conceive and give birth to a son named Obed, through whose lineage would come Jesus Christ the Messiah! Her life summarizes the promises of Isaiah 58 and encourages us to walk in her footsteps by fasting from a self-centered life in order to meet the physical and spiritual needs of others.

Amy Carmichael, the Scottish missionary who devoted her life to rescuing Indian children from slavery in Hindu temples, said, "*you can give without loving, but it is impossible to love without giving.*" This quote relates to more than just the passing of the offering plate on a Sunday morning; it relates to the commitment of our heart to give of our time, energies, and love. The amount and nature of our giving reflects the condition of our soul. If we

are truly under the rule of the compelling love of Christ in our life, we are eager to give to others.

The New Testament has a lot to say about giving, especially in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. In these chapters, Paul gives a mixture of rebuke and encouragement to the Corinthian believers who had expressed a desire to give to the needy saints in Jerusalem, but never followed through on their desire. They were acting like cisterns for hoarding rather than channels of blessing. His words encourage them to live with open heart and open hand. Let's look first at some of the principles found in 2 Corinthians 8:

- 1. Giving is sharing the grace of God with others.** It is a privilege and an honor (2 Corinthians 8:1).
- 2. The quality of our giving is based on the attitude, not the amount** (2 Corinthians 8:2). The Macedonians were poor themselves, but that didn't stop them from sharing what little they had. They not only gave, but they gave freely, liberally, and with much joy. God is the One who is able to take little and make much out of it! Remember the little boy and his lunch? Remember the widow and her mite?
- 3. Giving is an active form of fellowship among brothers and sisters in Christ** (2 Corinthians 8:3–4). The word used for "*participation*" in verse 4 is the Greek word for "fellowship." My husband and I are only able to do overseas mission work because of the free-will giving of open-handed believers. When we are in faraway places ministering God's Word to the poor and needy, we daily think of those back at home who have given so we can be there. Though we don't know the names and faces of everyone who has helped, we feel we have a bond of fellowship with them through their gifts. We are the ones on the ground working, but we know behind us are an array of people who have chosen to show their love by

giving. We often thank God in prayer for their fellowship with us.

4. **True giving involves first a giving of self, and then a giving of resources** (2 Corinthians 8:5; Romans 12:1–2). I recently Skyped my daughter in Australia. She was at home with a 1-year-old and a 3-year-old and was expecting her third baby in just a few short weeks. While we were Skyping, a lady from her church was there helping with cleaning and laundry to alleviate some of Katie’s load. That is a giving of self to help ease the burdens of others; I was so encouraged by the woman’s gift—and I’m sure my daughter was too!
5. **Giving is part of our Christian work and reveals our spiritual growth and the condition of our soul** (2 Corinthians 8:7). Compare this verse with James 2:15–17, *“If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”*
6. **Giving reflects the character of Jesus Christ.** This verse is definitely worth writing out to realize the full impact of God’s grace. *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich”* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Paul continues his instruction on giving in 2 Corinthians 9. This passage contains some precious promises from God to encourage us in our giving:

1. **Grace giving brings forth a bountiful harvest.** *“Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully”* (2 Corinthians 9:6). Paul uses a simple farming analogy

to teach us a spiritual lesson. If a farmer only scatters a little seed, he will only receive a little harvest. But if he scatters much seed, he will receive much harvest. This is true in farming, and this is true in grace-giving. If we hold back the grace with which God richly blesses us, we will not reap much spiritual fruit; but if we liberally spread that God-given grace, we will reap a bountiful harvest!

- 2. Our giving is loved by God when given with a cheerful heart.** *“Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”* (2 Corinthians 9:7). When it is time to give, we should pray about the amount God wants us to share so that we are giving according to His will.

Many times, when we are on the mission field, a believer with a specific need is brought to our attention. Gene prays about the amount to give and then he asks me, “What do you think we should give?” Almost always the amount I say and the amount he is thinking are the same. God guides us. Both the amount and the motive are important to God. If we are not able to give with a cheerful and willing heart, it is best to keep the money to ourselves. The word Paul uses for “*cheerful*” is the same Greek word that we get “*hilarious*” from. The privilege of giving should “crack us up” with joy!

- 3. God is able to make all grace abound in order to supply for our needs (not wants) with excess to give to others** (2 Corinthians 9:8–11). *“Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness”* (2 Corinthians 9:10). Remember the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8–16. When Elijah came to her home in the midst of a famine, she only had a small amount of oil and flour—enough to feed her and her son one more time before they died of starvation. When Elijah asked her to fix him a

bread cake first, she filled his request; and in doing so, God made all grace abound to this woman and her son. The oil and the flour never ran out until the famine was over. She teaches us a great lesson! Her willingness to give and share came first, and the supply followed.

4. **Giving also fills a spiritual need—that of encouragement** (2 Corinthians 9:12–15). When we willingly share the lavish grace God has given to us, it encourages other believers, increases our fellowship with them, and causes them to rejoice all the more in the indescribable gift—Jesus Christ our Lord!

Along with the principles and promises Paul sets forth on giving, consider the following blessings and warnings related to the ministry of giving. These verses speak for themselves.

Blessings:

1. Acts 20:25, *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*
2. Psalm 41:1, *“How blessed is he who considers the helpless. The LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble.”*
3. Proverbs 19:17, *“He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed.”*
4. Proverbs 22:9, *“He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor.”*

Warnings:

1. Proverbs 21:13, *“He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered.”*
2. Proverbs 22:16, *“He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself, or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.”*
3. Proverbs 22:22, *“Do not rob the poor because he is poor or crush the afflicted at the gate. For the LORD will plead their case, and take the life of those who rob them.”*

There is another aspect of living with an open hand that I think is valuable to consider. One of my favorite Christian authors is Isobel Kuhn. She and her husband John were pioneer missionaries to the Lisu people of southwest China. We have worked in some of the villages where they first brought the Gospel to poor mountain people.

In one particular village, we were shown a tree that Isobel had planted back in the 1930s. The tree was large and gave a beautiful canopy of shade in the village. We were told if anyone takes anything from that tree, they are fined; if anyone cuts a branch from the tree, they will be put in jail. If anyone kills the tree, they will be killed. This is how much they respected Isobel Kuhn.

In her book, *In the Arena*, she speaks of a time when it seemed like God was taking everything that was precious to her out of her hand. During that time, she learned the importance of relinquishing—ahead of time—rights to health, family, friends, and home. She summarizes what God taught her in this statement, *“Keep your treasures on the open palm of your hand. If you hold something tight clenched in your fist, God may have to hurt you in order to open your fingers and take it from you.”*

Living in the material world of today, we often cling to things rather than clinging to God. We are like the monkey who will reach into a pot to lay hold of the banana, but once he has the banana in his hand, he refuses to let go. And so, with banana in hand, he is stuck in the pot and easily trapped! Rather than let go of things and be free, we become chained down by them and live as slaves to our possessions.

For many years, we raised a family of five children in a small parsonage provided for us by the church where Gene pastored. Then, God made it possible for us to buy a home outside of town in the woods overlooking the Arkansas River. It was a beautiful home with room for the kids to run and play, with views across the treetops to the river. After nearly 20 years of marriage, we finally owned a home of our own, and I loved that home!

Two years after buying this house, my husband came home from a mission trip and said, “Get the house ready, we are putting it on the market to sell.” My heart sank.

He was just beginning to get involved in overseas mission work and felt that he could not live in such a house when brothers and sisters across the globe were in need of Bibles, teaching, and the basic necessities of life. The money could be better spent elsewhere. Within the week, we had gotten the house ready to sell, and the first person who walked in the door bought it.

From there, we lived in four different places over the next few years; but the profit we made on the sale of that house is what financially launched us into mission work. It wasn’t until the money from that home ran out that God began to raise up others in the Body of Christ to open-handedly provide the support we needed.

A few years ago, we were back in Arkansas for a youth camp and drove by to have a look at that house. I wondered how I would feel when I saw it. We pulled up, and there it was, sitting nestled in the woods looking just about the same as we had left it. I recalled the spot where the kids’ trampoline had been, the steps that our youngest would toddle up and down, and the screen porch where we would sometimes sit and enjoy the view. Good memories. But the house doesn’t own those memories—I do. Those memories and many more are buried deep in my soul and can be carried with me wherever I go on the face of this Earth.

In the midst of those motherly recollections, my heart felt free, content, blessed—and my hands felt open. I thought of all the countries and villages I had visited since leaving that home. I thought of all the faces around the world we had met and all the hearts we had been honored to share the teaching of God’s Word with. I thought of all the little brown faces in India that I had seen light up at the good news of the Gospel. And I thought of my Lord and His words to the disciples in Luke 18: 29–30, “*Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers*

or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life.”

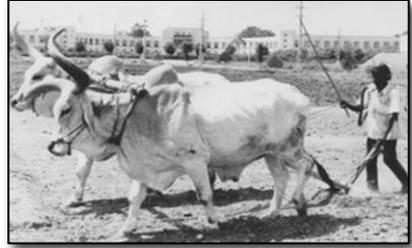
It was my husband—not me—who had the conviction and wisdom to sell that house, but I certainly don’t regret his decision. On the contrary, I have been richly blessed by his willingness to follow the call of God for our lives and live with an open hand. Every day we wake up, we have two options before us: to live the day as a cistern for hoarding or to live as a channel for blessing. Let’s live with an open hand, reaching out with lavish grace to our husbands, our children, and to the world beyond our own front door!

God places a high price tag on a willing heart and an open hand!

Lesson Eleven: Enthusiasm

“She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet.”

Proverbs 31:21



Verse 21 begins with the *lamedh*. *Lamedh* pictures an **ox goad** and speaks of **motivation, enthusiasm**.

The woman of honor is spiritually motivated!

In Proverbs 31:21, we see the virtuous woman prepared for adversity. She is free from the fear that often accompanies trial and adversity—in this case, snow—because she is mentally and physically prepared to meet it. Her preparation has involved the making of scarlet clothes, which would represent warm, quality garments to protect her family from the cold of winter. Snow is not much of a threat to you and me living in the time and place that we do, but there are certainly a number of other hardships that we may fear will confront us in the future.

Both the Old and New Testaments have a lot to say about facing adversity. Peter’s exhortation to the persecuted Jews of his day is applicable to each one of us. He says in 1 Peter 4:12–13, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”*

Let’s consider a few points from these verses:

- Peter begins his exhortation with the precious word, *“Beloved.”* Each and every one of us are objects of God’s

unfailing love. Adversity and trial should not cause us to question God’s love for us. It is steadfast, unchanging, and not to be doubted. In fact, we often come to know and experience the deeper love of God in the darkest of times.

- We should not be surprised by adversity and trial as they are a normal part of life in a fallen world. If you are not in a time of adversity now, you can bet that you will be in the future. Don’t let it jump out and scare you or surprise you; instead, expect its soon arrival!
- Peter tells us that trials are a test of our faith. Adversity exposes the true foundation of our life, whether it be on the deep, solid Rock of Jesus Christ or on the shallow sand of self.
- And finally, Peter exhorts us to “rejoice” in our trials. James tells us to “*consider it all joy*” when we encounter trials (James 1:2). Both writers, under the inspiration of God, confront our human perspective on trials in life. We tend to rejoice when things are going well and complain when they aren’t. Yet the Word of God says just the opposite. For it is in times of trial that we are most likely to grow spiritually (James 1:3–4) and gain eternal reward for our perseverance (James 1:12, see also Romans 5:3–4 and 1 Corinthians 3:12–14).

The *lamedh* file pictures an ox goad and speaks of motivation and enthusiasm in life. When an ox becomes tired, lazy, and unwilling to fulfill the purpose for which he is yoked, then the driver will apply pressure, where it hurts, to motivate the ox into service. He is quickly infused with enthusiasm for the work!

As believers, when we lack purpose, we lose motivation. We are normally enthusiastic about what interests us and, humanly speaking, enthusiasm can easily rise and fall. When we orient ourselves to the purpose that God has for our lives and the value of fulfilling that purpose in His sight, then we have a motivation

for life that keeps us pressing on. We have enthusiasm! The word “enthusiasm” actually comes from two Greek words meaning “God within.” Spiritually, it is the Spirit of God within us that motivates us and gives us the drive to press on and to stand firm in the face of adversity.

In the 25th chapter of 1 Samuel, we have the story of Abigail. One fine day, this woman of honor was suddenly confronted with a trial in her life, and she quickly knew what to do. The record tells us that Abigail was married to Nabal, whose very name means “fool.” He is also described as being “*harsh and evil*”—not very good traits in a man! However, Nabal was rich with livestock, servants, and goods.

David and his men were in the wilderness at the season of sheep-shearing. They had been kind to Nabal’s shepherds by offering them protection in the wilderness. So when the shearing was taking place, David sent ten of his men to speak to Nabal and kindly ask for some supplies. David and his men were hungry. When the young men sent by David approached Nabal with the request for food, he acted according to his name and nature, and rudely refused David’s request.

David is usually seen in Scripture as a patient man, slow to anger, and trusting in God. But Nabal’s harsh and evil response angered David to the point of revenge. He instructed 400 of his men to gird on their swords and follow him to wage war on Nabal and his servants. At this point in the story, trial and adversity are imminent. However, one of Nabal’s servants went straight to Abigail and told her about David’s request and Nabal’s response. The servant must have known and respected Abigail’s character and wisdom in order to go to her for help. He must have been confident that she would act in such a way as to avert the imminent disaster. In 1 Samuel 25:17, the servant said to Abigail, “*Now therefore, know and consider what you should do ...*”

And, Abigail did know and consider what to do. We immediately see in the very next verse that she “*hurried,*” gathered together a

generous amount of food to bring to David, and set off to meet him. When adversity hits, we often don't have time to "find a verse," go for counseling, or even sit down for a lengthy time of prayer. The very nature of adversity is its sudden and unpredictable nature. Sometimes, adversity comes so quickly that if we are not prepared ahead of time, both spiritually and physically, the adversity will find us frozen by fear and defeated in our faith.

But Abigail's wisdom goes beyond the gathering together of food to bring to David. Her wisdom shines the brightest when she meets David coming along the path. Abigail quickly dismounted from her donkey and fell on her face before David in an act of humility and respect. She willingly took the blame for Nabal's actions and pleaded with David to receive the offering of food she had graciously prepared. The words Abigail then spoke to David are so rich that I think it best to quote them exactly as she spoke them on that day:

*"Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant; for the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord is **fighting the battles of the LORD**, and evil shall not be found in you all your days. Should anyone rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, then the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; but the lives of your enemies **He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling.**"*

1 Samuel 25:28–29

Abigail is not just concerned with averting the battle and saving lives, though that is part of her motivation. She is also concerned with where David is spiritually. She knows him to be "*a man after [God's] own heart*" (1 Samuel 13:14), a man of faith, longsuffering, and courage. She cares about his reputation and his standing before God. By saying to David, "*my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD*," she is paraphrasing David's own words when he faced Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:47 and declared to the

enemy's face that "*the battle is the LORD'S*"! By assuring David "*the lives of your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling,*" Abigail continues to bring David's thinking and emotions back to a time when he faced a giant problem with a sling, a stone, and victorious faith. She is challenging him to trust in God—not himself—and prove to be an overcomer once again. What a woman!

After Abigail reminds David of his past, she then reminds him of his future. In 1 Samuel 25:30–31, she brings his attention to the fact that he has been anointed to be king of Israel and to act in revenge is not fitting behavior for a godly king. Abigail is using wisdom and skill to bring David to a place of repentance and correction.

David humbly receives Abigail's correction, acknowledges that God is the One who sent her to him that day, and praises her discernment. David must have liked what he saw in Abigail that day, for the story ends with the marriage of David and Abigail after Nabal's sudden death. In this story, we see ten characteristics of Abigail's life and faith. She was:

1. **"Intelligent,"** 1 Samuel 25:3. Some translations use the term "*of good understanding*" (NKJV). This does not refer to mental intelligence but understanding and wisdom that comes from the Word of God at work in the soul of a woman. Abigail was spiritually "*intelligent.*"
2. **"Beautiful,"** 1 Samuel 25:3. No doubt her physical appearance was pleasant, but the greatest beauty available to a woman is the inner beauty that accompanies a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:3–4).
3. **A Woman of Action,** 1 Samuel 25:19. Abigail was ready and able to move quickly in time of trial.
4. **Respectful,** 1 Samuel 25:23. When she confronted David, she did so with great respect for his person and position.

5. **Humble**, 1 Samuel 25:24. When confronting David, she also did so with great humility, shown in her willingness to take the blame for the situation.
6. **Gave Godly Counsel**, 1 Samuel 25:28–30. When she confronted David, she used words that would remind him of his faith in facing Goliath and bring him back to a place of spiritual strength.
7. **Guided by God**, 1 Samuel 25:32. David acknowledged that it was the Lord who had sent Abigail to him to bring correction and instruction.
8. **Discerning**, 1 Samuel 25:33. In times of trial, she knew the right thing to do!
9. **“Blessed,”** 1 Samuel 25:33. David sees that the blessing of God is on Abigail’s life.
10. **A Peacemaker**, Abigail’s wisdom and actions in time of adversity resulted in averting a great battle between her husband and David, which spared many lives.

These characteristics describe a spiritually motivated woman! This is one of my favorite stories in Scripture, and I use it here to illustrate one main truth: God uses prepared people! The time to prepare for adversity is before it hits—not during or after. When it starts snowing, it’s too late to get out the needle and thread and start stitching warm clothes. The kids could freeze to death before you are finished! This day—today—is preparation for tomorrow’s trials.

With this in mind, let’s consider some practical ways to prepare today for tomorrow’s troubles:

- **Daily Learn and Live God’s Word.**
In Psalm 119, the writer is living in the midst of great adversity. Throughout the book, he expresses his great

love and appreciation for God's Word. Over and over again, he praises the power of the Word to comfort, strengthen, and enlighten him in his hour of trial. In Psalm 119:49–50, he says, *“Remember the word to Your servant, upon which You have caused me to hope. This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life.”*

And in Psalm 119:143, he says, *“Trouble and anguish have overtaken; yet Your commandments are my delight.”* It is clear to see from these statements that this young man was sustained in adversity through the Word of God stored in his soul. Today is the day to prepare for adversity by storing up God's Word in **your** soul and applying it in thought, word, and deed.

- **Handle Small Adversities by Faith, for Greater Ones are Coming.**

The Book of Jeremiah contains a very important principle regarding preparation for adversity. The men of Anathoth are endangering Jeremiah's life. He complains to the Lord because it appears that these wicked men are prospering, and the Lord is not dealing justly with them. The Lord answers Jeremiah's complaint with this statement:

“If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, then how can you compete with horses? If you fall down in a land of peace, how will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?” Jeremiah 12:5–6

God is asking Jeremiah a gut-check question. He is telling Jeremiah that he had better learn to deal with the *“footmen”* (small adversities) because the *“horses”* (greater adversities) are on the way! He had better learn to stand firm in a land of peace because *“the thicket of the Jordan”* (a heavy forest with wild animals) is his next place of battle. I find these verses very convicting and extremely pertinent to the state of the Church in Western

civilization today. We need to learn to “suck it up” in whatever adversity we are facing because the future holds greater trials. Let’s learn from the words of the Lord to Jeremiah and handle the small adversities that we are in today with faith, for this will help prepare us for what lies ahead in the future.

- **Be a Student of Life.**

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about the failures and immoralities of the Jews under Moses. In 1 Corinthians 10:6 and again in verse 11, Paul says that these things are recorded for our “*example*” and “*for our instruction.*” We are meant to look at the stories of people in Scripture and pattern our life after their faith and avoid following the example of those who fell into sin and evil. In the same way, we can gain great insight and wisdom by watching the faith of those around us. When we see a brother or sister in adversity, and they continue to stand firm, praise God, and serve Him—this is for our example and instruction.

On the other hand, when we see a brother or sister who is not able to even “*run with footmen,*” this person also stands as an example to us of what not to do. The consequences they suffer are there for our instruction as well as their correction. As you observe life around you and hear of various people in tough situations, ask yourself the question, “How would I handle this adversity if it were to come on me?” Look to the Word of God in your soul, and consider how you would apply it in such a situation. Consider and meditate on what is the biblical thing to do, the proper way to think, to act, and to overcome. Practice overcoming.

Recently, our son, Cody, and his wife were at our house for dinner. Cody was a recon Marine in Afghanistan and saw some fierce fighting. We were discussing some of the trials that he and Amy faced during their service to our

country. Cody said, *“I became strangely comfortable with the fact that I would probably have my legs blown off.”* We praise God that he came back from Afghanistan whole in body and soul, but from Cody’s statement it was clear to see that he had pondered how to handle the adversity of being maimed before it ever happened. To do so is wise preparation for adversity.

- **Pray!**

Pray for God to prepare you for the tests and trials that are ahead in your life. He who called you into fellowship with His Son is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9)!

These are four practical ways to prepare today for the adversity of tomorrow. If we are spiritually motivated to prepare today, we will be spiritually equipped to be used by God in a time of trouble. I will close this lesson with one small verse that holds a huge promise:

*“You are my refuge in the day of disaster
[adversity].”* Jeremiah 17:17

Lesson Twelve: Refreshment

“She makes coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.”

Proverbs 31:22



Verse 22 of this acrostic poem starts with the Hebrew letter *mem*. *Mem* is the symbol of **water** and **represents refreshment**.



*The woman of honor drinks
from the Living Water.*

Thirst! Drink! Flow! When Jesus was in the midst of a Jerusalem crowd on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, he stood up and cried out to the eternal souls around him:

*“If anyone is **thirsty**, let him come to Me and **drink**. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘from his innermost being will **flow** rivers of living water.’”*

John 7:37–38

This is the invitation of Jesus to all who have a longing in their soul to know of something greater than themselves—to drink of something deeper in life than their own thoughts, motives, and energies. It is a divine invitation to partake of life, refreshment, cleanliness, and power. These are things that the world is unable to give a thirsty soul and, yet, how often we look to the world for a flow of happiness when it can only be found in Jesus Christ. The world offers the stale waters of a stagnant swamp while Jesus promises and gives the spiritual water that is flowing with life and plenty. It will be interesting to find out in eternity how many people responded that day to Jesus’ invitation of spiritual life, and how many walked away uninterested in an eternal fountain of refreshment.

The love of Jesus and His offer of salvation, is available to the multitudes; each and every soul born into this world has the opportunity to know and trust Him. First Timothy 2:4 tells us He *“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* But this invitation is also very personal, for previous to the passage in John 7, Jesus deliberately wandered into Samaria to give a personal offer of this living water to a poor and down-trodden woman. He went to the well in the middle of the day *“to seek and to save that which was lost”* (Luke 19:10). How significant is one soul to Jesus Christ!

When Jesus asked the woman in John 4 for a drink from the well, she was shocked that He would even talk to her. But Jesus came to this world to die for the sins of women just like her, and for the sins of women just like you and me. Surely in a life of going from one man to another—five times—she had come to the realization that this life could not quench her thirst for happiness (for she had had five husbands and was now living with a sixth man). No doubt dreams had been shattered and hope lost. Have you ever been there?

Jesus held up the cup of well-water she gave Him and spoke to the longing in her heart:

“Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” John 4:13–14

The glorious Son of God gave this gracious invitation of living water to a shunned woman in a barren land. We know from the rest of the passage that the Samaritan woman came to realize that Jesus Christ was the long-awaited Messiah, believed in Him, and led many others to meet Him that day. Finally, after so much heartache and disappointment in life, she found the Source of living water!

I remember with joy in my heart when I first believed in Jesus Christ as my Savior and, in doing so, discovered “*the fountain of living water*” (Jeremiah 17:13)—you probably do too! We should never forget the joy of our salvation, nor should we turn away from the Source of living water in the daily struggles of our life. Jeremiah describes this danger for us in Jeremiah 17:5–6:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the LORD. For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.”

I love it when verses of Scripture paint a visual picture in my mind of a spiritual truth. In reading these words in Jeremiah, I see a forsaken bush in the rocky desert and a large, lush, fruit-bearing tree by a cold, clear stream. These are two very different pictures because we all have two very different paths that we can choose to follow in life. If we trust in man and look to others, self, and the world to fill the thirsts in our heart, we will be void of happiness, joy, life, and love. We cannot even look to our husbands to fill the thirst of our heart for it is something that we will only find completely in Jesus Christ. If we trust in Him, drink from His “*water*,” and let His love and life flow in us, we will be refreshed and nourished in the trials of life. Every day we have this choice before us; and when we choose a path, we also choose the outcome!

In Jeremiah 2:13, Israel was rebuked by God:

“For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Again, this picture speaks of the contrast between seeking life and happiness in our God and seeking it in this world. It’s interesting that God chose to use the word “*fountain*,” because a fountain is never empty, nor is it ever completely full.

One of the challenges of the Christian life is consistency: living day-in and day-out with a passion to know God, love Him, obey Him, and serve Him. When Jesus spoke to the multitudes in John 7 and invited them to thirst and drink, those Greek verbs are in the present tense—keep on thirsting, keep on drinking—so that the river of living water will flow in our belly! We receive renewed passion for our Christian life when we continue to seek Him. We cannot afford to let our thirst for Him die, nor feel that we are “full” and have drunk enough of His river. Consider these verses:

- **Psalm 27:7–8**, *“Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice, and be gracious to me and answer me. When You said, ‘Seek My face,’ my heart said to You, ‘Your face, O LORD, I shall seek.’”*
- **Psalm 34:4**, *“I sought the LORD, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.”*
- **Psalm 69:32–33**, *“The humble have seen it and are glad; you who seek God, let your heart revive. For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise His who are prisoners.”*
- **Psalm 105:3–4**, *“Glory in His holy name; let the heart of those who seek the LORD be glad. Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face continually.”*
- **Jeremiah 29:13**, *“You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”*

I recently had a conversation with someone who had been molested by her father as a child. This young lady has forsaken her relationship with God because of what happened. She was told in Sunday school that if she trusted in God, He would protect her; and in her mind, He didn't. So now, she has had enough of God—no more thirsting, no more drinking, no more desire for the river of Living Water to flow in her soul.

Perhaps you have found yourself, or someone you know, in a similar situation where you feel God has let you down, and He no longer deserves your devotion. When we experience those deep hurts and betrayals in life, this is the very time that we must **run** to the Fountain of Living Water and drink deeply of His comfort, refreshment, and strength.

When my mother was a child, she lived near an artesian spring. She said whenever she was sick, her father would take her to that spring to drink, as he believed that water to be a source of healing. Jesus Christ is the Spring of comfort, healing, and help for our soul when we fall prey to the worst that this life has to offer. The wise woman will go to Him—not away from Him—during such times.

So, in Proverbs 31:22, we have the *mem* file, speaking of a fountain of refreshment. The verse encourages us, as women of God, to keep on thirsting, keep on drinking, and keep on allowing the Spirit of God to flow in and through us. This is an important principle, as all of the other virtues we have looked at in this study are dependent on the Spirit of God working in our life.

Proverbs 31:22 also brings our attention to the dress of the virtuous woman. She is clothed in “*fine linen and purple*”—the finest of garments worn by the rich or the royal (Genesis 41:42; Revelation 19:8; Jude 8:26; Luke 16:19). In ancient times, they would dye cloth with purple dye from sea mollusks found in the Red Sea. This was a very special dye reserved for the rich and significant people.

I know many women who I would consider to be “virtuous.” Some are rich and some are not. As a matter of fact, many of the ladies I would name as virtuous live in small huts of bamboo or clay and have probably never worn a new garment in their life. But the dress of the woman does reflect the condition of her soul. A woman who lives in light of her “riches” and “royalty” in Christ will dress in a respectable manner whether or not she has money. A woman who is drinking from the living waters of Jesus Christ will have a contentment of soul that will be reflected in how she adorns herself.

But, far more important than our outer clothing is the dress of the inner person. When we daily clothe ourselves in the divine wardrobe of God’s principles, our souls will reflect the royalty that is our birthright in Jesus Christ. Consider dressing yourself in this way:

- **Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.** *“The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and **put on the armor of light**. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But **put on the Lord Jesus Christ**, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts,”* Romans 13:12–14.

In this passage, Paul is encouraging us to put on the character of Christ as a guard and protection against the lusts of the flesh. To dress in the character of Christ is to reflect our position in the Royal Family of God (1 Peter 2:9).

- **Put on humility.** *“... and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for **GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE,**”* 1 Peter 5:5 (see also Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6). To dress our soul in humility is to, once again, reflect the character of Christ—the greatest, yet most humble man who ever lived.

- **Put on the new self.** *“And put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth,”* Ephesians 4:24. We have the power, in Christ, to be delivered from the futile ways of our old self and to live in the newness of Jesus Christ.
- **Put on the armor of God.** *“Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil,”* Ephesians 6:11. Part of the curse that came as a result of the fall was enmity between the woman and the serpent (Genesis 3:15). That enmity still exists in the world today and, as women, we must beware of the hatred Satan has for God’s daughters. The armor of God is designed to protect us against the devil’s attack—don’t leave home without it!
- **Put on good works.** *“Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness,”* 1 Timothy 2:9–10.

This verse discusses the dress of both our body and our soul. As women who make a claim to godliness, we should dress ourselves in a way that reflects our moral character: with modesty and discretion. Our dress can either enhance or detract from the beauty God gave us. But of even greater importance is the way we adorn our soul. Regardless of our outer person, good works bring a beauty and adornment to our life that is valuable in the sight of God. As a matter of fact, good works are what adorn the eternal wedding gown of the Bride of Christ in Heaven (Revelation 19:8)!

It is my prayer that these verses and principles will be a source of refreshment for whatever test, trial, or weariness you may be dealing with in your life at this time. I know from experience that

when I am very, very thirsty, the only thing that satisfies is cool water. There is no substitute for the basic need of the body to have water; and there is no substitute for the basic need of our soul to drink of Jesus Christ and be refreshed by His “*fountain of living water.*”

May you daily thirst for Him, drink from Him, and find yourself strengthened by Him in the inner man!

Lesson Thirteen: Submission

“Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.”

Proverbs 31:23



Verse 23 of this acrostic poem starts with the Hebrew letter *nun*. *Nun* is the symbol of a **fish on its tail** and represents **concentration**.

The woman of honor has a submissive soul.

Demeaning, ugly, and archaic—this is the world’s view of submission. To many women, just the mention of the word makes the hair on the back of their neck stand up. They liken feminine submission to being a doormat for a man to wipe his dirty boots on. These concepts of submission are so sad because they are so far from the truth of God’s Word. To those who properly understand biblical submission, it is one of the most beautiful concepts that ever flowed from God’s throne of grace. Biblical submission is like a symphony in which different instruments are synchronized with one another to produce harmony with distinction and unity with individuality—a sound pleasing to both man and God. Submission is a soul-response to love.

Our study of the woman of honor would not be complete without a section covering submission. I have chosen to include it under the *nun* file because when a woman properly understands the dignity of her submissive role and functions in it, the man is better able to concentrate on his God-given calling in life. Proverbs 31:23 says that the man is *“known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.”* In our vernacular, we would say that the man is “well-respected and able to hold a place of leadership.” A submissive and supportive wife helps the man to succeed.

Before we look at the New Testament teaching on submission, I think it is important that we establish some principles from the book of Genesis where marriage, with its blessings and problems, began. In Genesis 2, God first created the man out of the dust of the Earth and called him to a purpose or work: to care for the Garden and to name the animals. As God looked at His wonderful creation, He saw that something wasn't quite right. The man was alone! And so, He created the woman out of the rib of the man, to be at the man's side, to be his "*suitable*" or fitting helper (Genesis 2:20).

From creation, God puts man in a place of leadership and assigns him a work to do. God also realizes the man is incapable of fulfilling that work or mission on his own, so he gave the woman an important support-role. God's plan is always relational. The first human relationship started with Adam and Eve in the Garden. From the very beginning, it included leadership and "followship," or submission.

In Genesis 2:24, God said, "*For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*" The word "*cleave*" means "to be united, bonded, fused into one." In the sexual union between a husband and wife, they cleave to one another and become one flesh. This is a sacred relationship; no other relationship on the face of the Earth involves this "*one flesh*" concept. Certainly, this is referring to our sexual relationship with our husband, but I think this intimate relationship is also meant to picture our life with our husband. We are to cleave to him in his mission for life, to bond with him in the work God has called him to, to support him in all he does, and to be his helper, companion, and friend. When we fulfill this role, he is more likely to be "*known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.*"

In all things, Jesus Christ is our forerunner and example. Submission is an ancient concept, but far from archaic. Submission began at the Throne of God when the heavenly Father purposed in His heart to send His Son—His only Son—to

die on the cross for the sins of the world. And the Lord Jesus Christ, being totally one with the Father—holy, righteous, and obedient—submitted to the Father’s decree to come to this Earth as a man, to suffer the pain and shame of crucifixion in order to die for the sins of the world. That is submission and that is beautiful!

Jesus has never asked us to do anything He was not willing to do first.

Too often, submission is narrow-mindedly taught as the wife submitting to the husband, as if she were some lesser creature. In some parts of Africa, you will often see the women plowing the field, gathering the firewood, and hauling water from the well, while the men lounge in the shade. When mealtime comes, the wife will serve the husband, often approaching him on her knees with a plate of food. Then she waits outside while he eats; and after he is finished, she is free to eat whatever food is left.

I was sitting around a campfire one evening with two young, African women in the Western Province of Zambia. The conference teaching was over, and we were relaxing together by the fire when one of the young ladies said to me, *“Oh, Nancy, please, teach us how to be submissive to our husbands!”* I had to bite my tongue because what I really wanted to do was to teach the men how to appreciate and value their wives, but I didn’t have the right or the opportunity to do so. Instead, I shared with these beautiful young ladies the Christ-like nature of submission. They already had the actions down, but I wanted their eyes to be opened to the honor of submission—honor that comes from reflecting the Person and character of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul outlines for us a “chain of command” that reaches from Heaven to Earth. Through the inspiration of God, he says:

“But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.”

In this divine chain of command, three individuals are “*the head*,” and three individuals are the ones submitting to the head. God the Father is “*the head of Christ*”—Christ submits. Christ is “*the head of [the] man*”—the man submits. “*The man is the head of [the] woman*”—the woman submits. This puts the woman’s role of submission to her husband in the greater context of the plan of God. We aren’t singled out as the only ones given the command to submit. Submission is found in the Godhead, and submission is designed for the whole human race as well.

It’s also important to understand that God the Father and God the Son are co-equal in essence and nature, but they have different roles in the Godhead. In the same way, the man and woman are co-equal in their spiritual standing in Christ, but we are given different roles (Galatians 3:28). Submission is not about who is greater, smarter, or more important; submission is about fulfilling your God-given role. Relationships in both the Trinity and the home are family relationships. Submission gives people within a family differing opportunities to “*through love serve one another*” (Galatians 5:13). The woman then supports the man’s mission (Genesis 2:18), the man supports Christ’s mission (Matthew 28:18–20), and Christ supports the Father’s mission (Hebrews 10:7).

In Colossians 3:18–22, Paul further addresses relationships and order within the home. He admonishes women to be submissive (subject to), men to be loving, children to be obedient, fathers to be understanding, and slaves to be obedient “*with sincerity of heart*.”

In these five admonitions, Paul doesn’t just single out the women and pick on them, but gives instruction to everyone in the family so that there might be order and peace within the home. Roles are important in God’s plan; and therefore it’s important that we fulfill our God-given roles with love and grace. But at times, that is hard to do. Sometimes we don’t want to submit to our husbands; sometimes they don’t want to love us. Children don’t like to be obedient; fathers struggle with understanding. And

what slave is at peace with his role? Even from the farthest fling of Heaven, God understands the human struggles within your heart and home. And so, the admonishments of Colossians 3:18–22 are sandwiched in between promises of encouragement. Scripture is so beautiful!

Paul knows that the home is a breeding ground for resentment, not contentment, and so in Colossians 3:12–15, he encourages us to “*put on a [Jesus] heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*” Paul says we must “bear with one another and forgive one another,” especially within the home. Imagine how your home would change if everyone living in it followed these commands! “*Beyond all these things,*” he tells us to “*put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.*” The love of Christ is the “duct tape” that holds the family together. Every home has duct tape, but few have the love of Christ!

Then Paul encourages us to “*let the word of Christ,*” with all of its beauty and power, richly “ *dwell within*” our hearts and within our homes (Colossians 3:16). We should “*let the word of Christ*” have a voice and a song within our home that we might have a ministry to those we love the most. If we are doing all of these things, submission will come more easily in the heart of a woman.

And then in Colossians 3:17 (remember the importance of context—this is the verse right before women are told to be submissive), Paul says, “*Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.*” This verse encourages us to submit unconditionally as to the Lord, rather than man. In other words, because of God’s understanding of the feminine heart, He acknowledges that sometimes our husbands do not act in a way that deserves submission; in such cases, we submit out of love and obedience to the God who loves us, died for us, rose again, and is sitting at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus Christ is worthy of our submission. Submission is a soul-response to His love!

After Paul's five admonitions of Colossians 3:18–22, he again gives encouragement. In Colossians 3:23–24, he says:

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

These verses again acknowledge the struggle we sometimes have, to fulfill our God-given roles within the home. When our husband is acting in such a way that thoroughly suppresses our desire to submit to him, we must remember that, ultimately, it is the Lord Jesus who we serve through submission. The Lord Jesus is faithful to see submission that comes as a love-response to Him, and His reward is sure! When we struggle with submission, our struggle is tempered by knowing that we are doing it for our perfect Christ—not for our imperfect husband.

Now, let's sum up this Colossians passage with flashing red lights. The world would look at these verses and tend to put the words *“wives, be subject to [their] husbands”* in bright red, underline it, and say, “See, Paul is a woman-hater!” They will zoom in on those words and forget what comes before and after. But if our heart is open to God's truth, we will understand the **context** of the passage and the heart of God behind it. Let's put the flashing red lights where God puts them: on **Him**, because He is worthy. Notice that we are only told to submit one time in the passage, but five times we are encouraged to consider Jesus in our submission:

- *“do all [submit] in the name of the Lord Jesus,”* Colossians 3:17.
- *“[submit] as is fitting in the Lord,”* Colossians 3:18
- *“do your work heartily [submission], as for the Lord rather than for men,”* Colossians 3:23
- *“Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance [for submission],”* Colossians 3:24

- *“It is the Lord Christ whom you serve [through submission],”* Colossians 3:24.

You can see the issue is submission to Jesus, and we show submission to Him by submitting to our husband.

The final verse, Colossians 3:25, says this:

“For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.”

Remember the context of this lesson is Proverbs 31:23, *“her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.”* In other words, he is seen with respect and put into a place of honor. Sometimes, as the man focuses his life on career, or even ministry, he does well at it, and he is praised and promoted for his work. Outside the home, he is seen as successful; while inside the home, the wife and children are embittered due to some area of sin or weakness in the man’s life. Or, perhaps the man is so concentrated on his career or ministry that there is little or no time or energy left for the family. Both of these situations can result in great resentment within the home. If you are living in either of these situations, I would encourage you to consider the above verse.

In the context of family life, God says he who is doing wrong will suffer the consequences of that wrong. In other words, if the man of the house is successful outside the home, but negligent or sinful within the home, God **will** deal with it. The wife needs to keep on submitting, be patient, and pray. Trust God and His timing to deal with the shortcomings and sin in your husband’s life. God does not always work according to our time clock but He is **always** faithful!

First Peter 3:1–6 is one of the most complete passages on submission and one that every Christian woman should know and understand. Along with necessary instruction, it gives valuable encouragement. We will begin with 1 Peter 3:1–2:

“In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.”

This verse starts with *“in the same way.”* It refers back to the example of Christ in 1 Peter 2:21–25. He was submissive to God the Father even to the point of death on the cross. As a result of His submission, He was reviled, threatened, suffered, and *“bore our sins in His body on the cross.”*

Through all of this, He did not sin but entrusted Himself to a just and righteous heavenly Father. His attitude of maintaining a submissive spirit in the midst of suffering stands as our example. Peter recognizes that when we are in a marital relationship with a disobedient husband (whether it be an unbeliever or a rebellious believer), we are going to suffer. Therefore, he encourages wives to submit and suffer in the same way that Jesus did, by *“entrusting [themselves] to Him [the heavenly Father].”*

When marital harmony is disrupted by disobedience on the part of the husband, whether it be long- or short-term disobedience, the woman is fiercely tempted to whip her husband back into shape! Nagging, complaining, threatening, and arguing is not Peter’s solution for the problem. Silence is. Silence, coupled with submission, shows the husband the respect he longs for and goes a long way to bring him to repentance.

Christ won the thief on the cross *“without a word.”* Instead, His quiet spirit—in the midst of suffering—was a loud witness to the thief and brought him to saving faith. Romans 2:4b says, *“the kindness of God leads you to repentance.”*

When a husband is disobedient, he doesn’t need to hear a sermon from his wife. He needs to observe a sermon in his wife, as she models the obedience and love of Jesus Christ. Submission is the most powerful tool we have, to bring about change in a

disobedient husband. This requires much patience and prayer on the part of the woman, as repentance on the part of the man may be a long time comin'!

Now let's move on to 1 Peter 3:3–4:

“Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.”

Women are drawn to beauty. I have worked among women on every continent of the Earth, and I have observed that they are not only drawn to beauty, but they desire beauty for themselves. First Peter 3:3–4 teaches us that submission starts in the heart—in the inner person of a woman—and then works out into words and action. This gentle, quiet, and submissive spirit that Peter encourages us to have, is our source of true beauty—inner beauty. Inner beauty adorns our life in a way that external beauty never can.

I have had the pleasure of meeting a multitude of women who are not physically attractive by the world's standards, but their eyes and faces glowed with a Christ-like love that made them shine with the beauty of Jesus Christ. This inner beauty is not only precious in the sight of God, but it is imperishable. Inner beauty doesn't wrinkle, sag, or even die! Inner beauty grows with time and lasts into eternity. I want that kind of beauty. We all come to that inevitable moment when we meet time and gravity head on and say, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, I am my mother after all!”

I would encourage you younger women to realize such a time is coming in your life. Prepare for it now by developing the inner beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit so that, as your outer person ages, your inner person is made more glorious.

In 1 Peter 3:5–6, Peter tells us that submission is our spiritual heritage. The “*holy women*” who lived before us adorned their life with submission, and we are to follow as spiritual daughters in their footsteps:

“For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.”

Peter, under the inspiration of God, recognized that the command of submission may be a little bit scary to a woman. And so, he singles out Sarah as our example. In Genesis 12, she willingly followed Abraham out of her homeland to a land she did not know—that could be a bit scary.

Sometime later, there was a famine in the land and Abraham went down to Egypt. Being concerned about the safety of his little old self, he told Sarah to say she was his sister (she actually was his half-sister), but to leave out the fact that she was his wife. Consequently, the Pharaoh of Egypt took her into his harem—hmmm, maybe a lot scary. But God faithfully intervened on Sarah’s behalf and protected her from harm. In Genesis 20, Abraham repeated the same mistake, and Sarah was taken by Abimelech, the king of Gerar. Once again, God proved Himself faithful and protected Sarah in every way.

First Peter 3:5–6 is making the point that submission to our husbands, especially a disobedient husband, sometimes puts us in an uncomfortable or vulnerable position. Even then, we can willingly submit without fear. Where does our peace and calm come from in such situations? If we compare this passage with Romans 8:15, we find that God does not give “*a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’*” Our peace, our

calm, and our confidence come from our relationship with the heavenly Father. We do not need to fear submission because we know the God who ordered us to be submissive. Cry out to Him! The same faithful God who protected Sarah is standing ready to watch over His daughters of today.

We have covered some valuable Scriptures, but these principles may have raised some questions, especially in the minds of younger women. Let's summarize this section with some points that help us understand what submission does and doesn't look like.

Submission does not:

- take away your right to express your opinion or have input into the decisions of the household. But the husband has the final decision, along with greater accountability before God, for leading the family in the right direction.
- require the wife to follow her husband into sin and disobedience to God. In such times, we must *“obey God rather than men,”* Acts 5:29.
- require the wife to be subjected to physical abuse that endangers her body and soul (see 1 Corinthians 13:4–6).
- require the woman to submit to other men who are not in a place of authority over her (1 Peter 3:1).

Submission does:

- reflect the Person of Jesus Christ.
- adorn the woman's life.
- fulfill her duty to obey Scripture and serve in her God-given role.
- help bring harmony and unity to the marriage relationship.

It is my prayer that the Scriptures we have looked at will encourage you to see the Christ-like beauty of submission and

the joy of walking in the path of God’s truth. Submission requires humility, but God gives grace to the humble of heart (James 4:6).

May His grace bless your soul with a gentle and quiet spirit—one that will bless your marriage and family, and bring eternal glory to Jesus Christ!

I would like to close this lesson with a poem that my husband and I are very fond of:

*“As unto the bow the cord is,
So unto the man is woman;
Though she bends him, she obeys him,
Though she draws him, yet she follows.
Useless each without the other.”*

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Lesson Fourteen: Power

*“She makes linen garments
and sells them, and supplies
belts to the tradesmen.”*

Proverbs 31:24



Verse 24 of this acrostic poem starts with the Hebrew letter *sumekh*. *Sumekh* is a picture of a **fulcrum** and pictures **power**.

The woman of honor uses the power of prayer.

In Proverbs 31:24, we see the virtuous woman being industrious in the making of fine linen garments and belts. There isn't a whole lot that needs to be said about that statement. However, the use of the *sumekh* file in this verse opens up the issue of divine power in our life. We are fallen creatures living in a sinful world; we need a source greater than ourselves to be virtuous and victorious.

Charles Spurgeon said, *“Prayer moves the arm that moves the world.”* For the woman, prayer is one of her greatest power sources. We are under the curse of enmity between Satan and the woman (Genesis 3:15); we are in subordination to the leadership of imperfect husbands; and our being is corrupted with our own old sin nature. We desperately need prayer! When a woman falls on her knees before *“the throne of [God’s] grace,”* she is calling on the greatest power source in the universe to be attentive to her needs and intervene on her behalf and on behalf of those she loves.

Chrysostum (Archbishop of Constantinople, 347–407 A.D.) stated it this way, *“The potency of prayer has subdued the strength of fire; it has bridled the rage of lions, hushed the anarchy to rest, extinguished wars, appeased the elements,*

expelled demons, burst the chains of death, expanded the gates of heaven, assuaged diseases, repelled frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. Prayer is an all-efficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine which is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain, and the mother of a thousand blessings.” If this is the power of prayer why do we so often close our heart and walk away from its potential in our life?

The King of kings and Lord of lords, and the Creator and Sustainer of all life, is beckoning us to come before His throne in times of need. Prayer is all about our relationship with Jesus Christ and communication with Him and the Father. There are so many lovely verses concerning prayer—verses that are full of invitation and promise. Let’s look at some of them with a view toward being encouraged in our prayer life:

- *“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need,”* Hebrews 4:14–16.

When Jesus paid the price for our sin on the cross, the thick, heavy veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). Before His death, it was there to conceal the glory of God; but in Christ, God was declaring to the world that entrance into His throne was open for all who believe in Him. What a precious privilege! Therefore, we are encouraged to come before the Father’s throne with boldness, encouraged by the fact that Jesus understands our struggles, troubles,

weaknesses, temptations, and trials—because He, too, was a man.

- *“Pray without ceasing,”* 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

Our Lord always wants to hear our voice. He is on duty 24/7 to hear our prayers. One time, when we were working in India and traveling by taxi through Jaipur, we saw many men on elephants. They were dressed luxuriously and waiting to enter a big convention center.

We asked the driver what was going on, and he said there was a group-wedding about to take place. It was the day that one of the Hindu gods was waking from a long sleep. During his four-month “nap” (being a false god must be exhausting!), weddings are forbidden, and so when he wakes up, many people want to get married! We asked him if he was bothered by the idea that his god slept. We then went on to tell him that we believed in Jesus Christ—the one true and living God of the Bible who never sleeps but is always attending to our prayers and needs! Hopefully, it gave him something to think about. We can pray without ceasing because our God hears, cares, and answers without ceasing!

- *“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but **the Spirit Himself intercedes for us** with groanings too deep for words,”* Romans 8:26 .

Paul includes himself in this statement. If the great Apostle Paul did not always know the right way to pray, we should not be surprised that sometimes we are not sure about what to ask God to do. Certainly, there are times when we know the will of God in a situation, and we can pray according to His will. But at other times we are uncertain. As in every lack in our life, God is faithful to provide, so the Spirit joins us in prayer before the

Father—praying perfectly, passionately, and deeply on our behalf. What an amazing comfort!

- *“Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, **who also intercedes for us,**”* Romans 8:34.

Not only does the Spirit of God pray for the believer, but Jesus Christ also comes alongside us in our trials and weaknesses to pray according to the will of God. I am blown away by the truth of these verses as I recognize the personal nature of God’s help in my life. It is by grace that we can enter boldly before God’s throne, but to know that the Spirit and the Son both join us there—that is amazing grace! So many times, I am encouraged by believers who say “we pray for you every day,” but to also know that the Spirit and the Son are praying is a truth that should encourage us in any and every trial. We are never alone!

Reflecting on the last lesson on submission and our role in God’s chain of command for the human race, we—as women—are sometimes put into seemingly hopeless situations where we are vulnerable to the sinful actions of a rebellious man. (Of course, oftentimes men suffer from the sinful actions of a rebellious woman—my husband certainly has!) Most married couples I know will admit to working through some very deep valleys of despair in their relationship. The ones who haven’t been willing to work through them have ended in divorce or separation. To work through a deep-seated problem with the truth of God’s Word brings glory to God and credit to the power of His Word. To overcome sin, fault, and failures in a marriage relationship results in a testimony to the mighty grace of God.

In our lesson on submission, we looked at 1 Peter 3:1–2:

“In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, so that even if any of them are

disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.”

With this verse, I mentioned that the best way to win a rebellious husband back to God was not through nagging or preaching, but through silence and a display of respect. True!

But the Word of God also gives us another course to follow at certain times. I want to talk about what my husband calls a “plea for righteousness.” I first heard him teach this principle many years ago, and it came as a great help to me. Though he was the one teaching the principle from the pulpit, I was the one in need of hearing it. There was a situation in our own home that I was really struggling with—and so it resonated with me. A “plea for righteousness” is a valid course for a woman to follow in marriage when the man is harming the relationship and/or the family through “unrighteous” behavior. Perhaps the clearest example of a “plea for righteousness” is found in the book of Esther.

Although the name of God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, His sovereign hand is seen moving in each and every situation. Esther was a Jewish orphan girl raised by her wise cousin, Mordecai, in the land of Persia. God divinely directed many people and events in the kingdom of Persia in order to raise Esther up to the position of favored queen. In the third chapter of Esther, the evil man, Haman, was put into a place of power in the kingdom. Mordecai, being a good Jewish man, refused to bow to Haman, so Haman’s anger burned against Mordecai and all of the Jewish people. He then manipulated King Ahasuerus to allow a decree to be sent out that on a certain day the people of Persia are “*to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews*” (Esther 3:13).

When news of the decree reached the ears of Mordecai, he “*put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly*” (Esther 4:1). As the news spread throughout the kingdom, all of the Jews mourned with fasting,

weeping, and wailing. Finally, news of the decree reached the queen's palace, and Esther joined her kin and countrymen in mourning, and "*writhed in great anguish*" (Esther 4:4).

Mordecai recognized that Esther was in a position of opportunity. He ordered "*her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people*" (Esther 4:8). Mordecai was asking Esther to request her husband to act rightly on behalf of the Jews—in other words, to go to him with a "plea of righteousness."

Esther had been in the habit of following Mordecai's leadership and wisdom in her life, even after she had left his care to be brought into the king's palace. But when this request reached her ears, she was at first unwilling, citing the fact that to approach the king without his invitation could result in her own death. Mordecai responded to Esther's hesitation with these words, "*For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?*" (Esther 4:14).

This is a "suck-it-up, princess" moment for Esther. Every test and trial in life is a call from God for greater humility and devotion. God is calling Esther to be willing to lay down her life to save her people. She bravely stood up to the calling and replied to Mordecai, "*Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish*" (Esther 4:16).

We have not yet come to the point in the story where Esther makes her "plea of righteousness." But before we go any deeper, let's consider a few points of application from what we have already seen. The lead-up to a "plea of righteousness" is very important:

- There is a very real violation of “right” in Esther’s situation, and her husband, the king, endorsed the evil. A “plea of righteousness” is not just a request for something you would like to see happen in order to make your life easier. It is a plea for what is right and proper in God’s sight.
- Esther is willing to suffer—even die—in order to right the wrong. This is obviously a very extreme case; but even so, if we are led to go to our husbands with a “plea of righteousness,” we must realize that we may suffer as a consequence. He may reject our plea, become insulted, silent, angry, or a multitude of other responses.
- Before Esther addresses her husband with her request, she spends time in fasting and asks others to join her. The passage does not specifically say that she and the others prayed, but according to Jewish custom, fasting was undertaken for the purpose of humbling oneself before God and coming to Him in prayer. No doubt Mordecai, Esther, and her maidens were joining with the Jews of Persia in prayer.

Before confronting your husband with a “plea of righteousness,” it is very important to check your own soul-attitude. You can’t really address an area of unrighteousness if you, too, are walking in unrighteousness. Be aware of the temptation toward pride, a judgmental spirit, anger, bitterness, or resentment. A “plea of righteousness” should be done with a humble, respectful heart and with full dependence on God’s working in your soul. We should go face-down before God with our “plea of righteousness” long before we go face-to-face with our husbands over the issue.

In chapter 5, Esther bravely goes before King Ahasuerus. It is the third day of fasting, and she dresses in her royal robes and stands in the inner court. When the king sees his beautiful wife, “*she*

obtained favor in his sight” (Esther 5:2), and he extends the golden scepter and asks for her request. Whew! Her life is spared.

Esther requests that the king and Haman come to a banquet that she has prepared. The king agrees and hurries to call Haman to accompany him. As the king and Haman are eating and drinking wine, the king asks Esther the nature of her request. She speaks to him with great respect and honor, and invites him and Haman to return to another banquet the next day in which she will reveal her request.

In Esther 7, we have the second banquet of Esther, King Ahasuerus, and Haman. The king again asks Esther about her request, and she exposes to him the evil plot of Haman against the Jews. Take notice of her words in Esther 7:3–4, *“If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request; for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Now if we had only been sold as slaves, men and women, I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king.”*

Now, ladies, I know the language Esther uses to address her husband is not the kind of language we use to communicate today. I can’t remember a single time when I have said, “if I have found favor in your sight, O Gene ...” The principle is important; her “plea of righteousness” is done with humility and respect. But it is also done with seriousness and with truth. She exposes Haman for what he is—an evil and wicked man. That day, Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

This is a very quick synopsis of the story of Esther with the purpose of highlighting her “plea of righteousness.” The story ends very well for Esther. As a result of her plea, the king sent out a decree allowing the Jews of Persia to fight back and defend themselves from attackers. God empowered his people to be

victorious “*so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them*” (Esther 9:1b).

As I said, Esther’s “plea of righteousness” was very effective. But that is not always the case. What course should a woman take if she is passionate about seeing a wrong corrected in her home or marriage relationship, and her “plea of righteousness” before her husband falls on deaf ears? Trust God, pray some more, be patient. Give God more time to work His way within your husband’s heart, for He has promised to complete the work He started in the soul of every man and every woman (Philippians 1:6). Continue to pray about the situation, asking God to give you wisdom to know how to deal with it and when to next approach your husband. Wait on the Lord while you wait for your husband to be brought to righteousness—not forsaking your respectful behavior and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God!

Tough stuff? Absolutely! But a marriage relationship is worth suffering hardship over. It is the foundational relationship of home and family. It is the representation of Christ and the Church on Earth. It is so easy to give up and give in to despair, depression, separation, or even divorce.

At one point in our marriage, my husband and I were so close to losing it all. Every day, we thank God that He saw fit to give us the conviction, grace, and mercy we needed to work through the tough stuff to get to the fun stuff. Now, we have been married more than forty years, we have so much to celebrate! We love each other more and more each day—we are blessed with five fine grown children, three beautiful daughters-in-law, an okay son-in-law (just kidding, he calls me “Battle-Axe,” but I still love him!), and nine extraordinary little grandbabies. Yes, extraordinary! We can love on them and enjoy them together, because—by God’s grace—we stayed together! Our marriage declares the faithfulness and love of God to our children, grandchildren, and to the Body of Christ. On top of that, we work and serve together—all of which would have been lost if we had called it quits.

Now, I want to say a word of encouragement to those of you who may be going through a marriage break-up or have suffered divorce in the past. Sometimes a husband is unwilling to be faithful and is determined to stay the course of sin and immorality. Divorce happens. Sometimes it is not the woman's choice, but still it happens. Sometimes, in spite of many well-crafted and God-guided "pleas for righteousness," the man remains in his rebellious state.

Over the years, I have seen this happen to many friends and sisters-in-Christ; when it happens, I hurt and ache for them deep within my heart. But I have also observed that when the woman stays faithful to God and continues to seek His Word and direction in her life, God works it all together for her good and His glory (Romans 8:28). He brings healing and joy back into her soul and helps her to move on in a fruitful life. At this age in my life, I can readily concur with the words of David in Psalm 37:25, *"I have been young and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken."*

There is also a place for a "plea of righteousness" outside the marriage relationship. Since we covered the story of Abigail in a previous lesson, we won't look at her story again in detail. However, when she approached David in 1 Samuel 25, she was approaching him with a "plea of righteousness." With the same humility and respect that Esther displayed, she fell on her face before him and implored him to do the right thing before God and man. He was a warrior, *"a man after [God's] own heart"* (1 Samuel 13:14), and the one anointed to be the next king of Israel; yet Abigail had the courage and wisdom to bring him to a point of correction.

And then, there is the case of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. We all know their story, right? The often-overlooked story of the daughters of Zelophehad shows us another example of a "plea of righteousness." Their father died in the wilderness, without sons to leave his inheritance to. In Numbers 27, they bring their case before Moses and state, *"Why should the name*

of our father be withdrawn from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father's brothers" (Numbers 27:4).

Moses brings their case to the Lord, and the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "*The daughters of Zelophehad are **right in their statements**. You shall surely give them a hereditary possession among their father's brothers, and you shall transfer the inheritance of their father to them*" (Numbers 27:7).

These five sisters went before the spiritual leadership of their country in order to ask them to do the right thing, and God endorsed their request. When we stand on truth and righteousness, we are standing with the Lord!

Second Timothy 1:7 says, "*For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.*"

This is a great verse to summarize this lesson, as we are encouraged to "[go] *boldly to [God's] throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16, NKJV). At times, that boldness drives us to confront others with a "plea of righteousness"—always done in the humble love of Christ and the discipline of soul that comes from God's inerrant Word!

Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might!

Lesson Fifteen: Love

*“Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she smiles at the future.”*

Proverbs 31:25



Verse 25 starts with the Hebrew letter *ayin*. *Ayin* pictures a **fountain** and speaks of **life**.



*The life of the woman of honor flows
with the love of Christ!*

I find it quite humorous that Proverbs 31 mentions the clothing of the woman so many times, or puts biblical principles into the analogy of dress. Most women tend to like clothes and care about the way they are dressed. When we are preparing for a mission trip, I am thinking about what clothes to take weeks in advance. Since I am usually limited to what I have on and two other changes, I want to like wearing what’s in my suitcase. The clothes I pack need to be appropriate to the culture I am traveling to and the weather we will be encountering, comfortable enough for long days of travel, wrinkle-free, and have a little bit of attractiveness—maybe just for vanity sake! Ah! So much to consider!

My husband, on the other hand, thinks about what knives he is going to take weeks in advance. Since he is going to be limited to only two or three, maybe four (he **really** likes knives!), he wants to like what’s in his suitcase. It is not until we actually start to pack that he even thinks about what clothes to bring. That just baffles me!

In Proverbs 31:25, the woman of honor is dressed in strength and dignity. Since you can’t be physically clothed in “*strength and dignity*,” this verse is referring to the spiritual character of the

virtuous woman. The word “*strength*” is the Hebrew word *oz* and means “strength or might.” The word for “*dignity*” (NASB) is the Hebrew word *hadar* and can also mean “beauty, honor, and glory.”

When I think of strength and might, coupled with beauty, honor, and glory, there is one person that **immediately** comes to the forefront of my mind—the Lord Jesus Christ! Romans 13:14 tells us to “*put on the Lord Jesus Christ,*” to morally and spiritually dress in His character, His strength and might, His beauty, His honor, and His glory. That is quite a wardrobe!

One of the most prominent aspects of the character of Jesus is the fountain of His forgiveness. The *ayin* file of Proverbs 31:25 speaks of a fountain—an ever-flowing source of life and refreshment. The forgiveness of Christ knows no limit or boundary for, through faith in Jesus Christ, “*He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,*” Colossians 1:13–14.

In John 8:1–11, we find the fountain of Christ’s forgiveness poured out on a sinful soul. Jesus is up early in the temple to teach the people when the religious leaders storm into the room. They hurl before Him a woman “*caught*” in adultery. In one cruel turn of time, the woman was grabbed from the pleasure of a man’s touch to the pain of man’s wrath. The word “*caught*” is *katalambano*, meaning “to take eagerly,” “to seize or overtake.” “*The scribes and ... Pharisees*” were pretty happy to have caught this woman in order to use her to test and discredit the Lord Jesus Christ. (Good luck with that, scribes and Pharisees!) The woman was probably scantily dressed in whatever she could throw around her in that mad moment of being discovered in an adulterous position.

No doubt, as she now stood before the Lord, she tasted the depth of her own shame and shuddered in fear of certain judgment. In Jewish law and custom, an adulteress was to be stoned (Leviticus

20:10). She was now expecting that kind of judgment, expecting that kind of climax to her regrettable sin. We can only imagine the thoughts racing through her head: Who will throw the first stone? Where will it land on my body? How bloody will it be? How long will it take before I fall into unconsciousness? Why did I throw my life away on a bed of sin?

But then, her thoughts are interrupted by the actions of Jesus. What is this? His scorn is directed not at her, but at the religious leaders. Jesus stooped down in front of these men and wrote something—we don't know what—on the ground at her feet and said, *“He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”* He continued writing on the ground. The next verse says, *“when they heard [Jesus], they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones.”*

I find it interesting that Jesus wrote a message to them, but when they heard it, they went out. It must have been one of those moments when you are so confronted by truth that you openly speak the words you are reading. Or perhaps, they heard the ramifications of those words penetrate the stony coldness of their hearts. Either way, the sound of that message took all the air out of their puffed-up hearts, and they walked away deflated, but unchanged, leaving behind them the incarnate God—the bodily fulfillment of all they claimed to believe.

And Jesus was left alone with the woman. Moments after an intimate encounter with the wrong man, she was ushered into an intimate encounter with the right Man! This woman was in the presence of the gentleman Jesus; she was in the shadow of the Savior—in the hands of the One who would be nailed to a cross for the sins of the world. His blood would be shed so that hers could be spared. This day, her life was transformed by the Master's touch as she felt the tender hug of His love—a faithful and unconditional love of the sort she had never known before. Her imminent stoning was suddenly interrupted by eternal forgiveness. It was the most amazing surprise of her life!

Jesus spoke to her—to her ears, to her heart, to the dark, needy depths of her soul, “*‘Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.’*” He loved her enough to offer His fountain of forgiveness. He also loved her enough to exhort her to a higher standard of living. In this final statement from the Lord, we find the balance of grace and truth—grace that forgives and truth that beckons us all to walk in obedience to His Word for His glory!

I love surprises, and perhaps the surprise that means the most to me is when I have sinned or failed in some way. I come into my husband’s presence expecting a lengthy sermon, and then he surprises me with understanding and forgiveness. It is such a breath of fresh air! (It makes me want to buy him a new knife!) What I anticipated would turn into a “big deal” is suddenly dealt with by the love of Christ in my husband’s heart—and the big deal becomes a done deal. We can move on in fellowship and forgiveness. That kind of response builds my love for him.

I try to surprise him as well, with a quick and ready forgiveness for his faults and failures, and that builds his love for me. Forgiveness makes marriage so much sweeter. Forgiveness makes any relationship so much sweeter! We are not in control of how others react to our faults and failures but we are in control of how we react to the faults and failures of others.

As believers in Jesus Christ, the goal of our soul should be conformity to His likeness. To forgive others is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities to manifest His likeness. Ephesians 4:31–32 says:

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you.”

“Bitterness ... wrath ... anger ... clamor and slander” are sins. We are to put off these sins by confession (1 John 1:9). But confession should never be the end of the road for us; Ephesians 4:32 leads us to correction. That correction is forgiveness toward others.

Consider these verses on the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, and forgive others in just the same way:

1. **Psalm 103:2–3**, *“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons **all** your iniquities, who heals **all** your diseases.”*
Colossians 2:13b, *“... having forgiven **us all** our transgressions.”*

The forgiveness of Jesus Christ covers all sins! Therefore, we should be willing to forgive others of all sins—the ones we consider both big and small.

2. **Matthew 18:21–22**, *“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”*

The forgiveness of Jesus Christ knows no limit. If He commanded Peter to forgive his brother up to 490 times in a day, think how much greater His forgiveness is for us! This should not give us license to continue in sin; rather, out of appreciation for His grace, it should motivate us to strive for purity from sin.

In this passage, Jesus uses the number *“seventy times seven.”* I don’t think it is a random number picked out of the air, but a number that would have been familiar to Peter from his knowledge of the Old Testament. Seventy weeks, or seventy times seven (used in Daniel 9), would have reminded Peter of the longsuffering and patience of

God to His chosen people—the Jewish nation. Though their unfaithfulness to God was frequent, still He repeatedly showed love, mercy, and forgiveness. For Jesus to now use that same number, would have called Peter to a higher standard of forgiveness than he had ever known before. It also calls us to a higher standard of forgiveness—forgiveness like that of the Son of God.

There should be no limit to the number of times we are willing to forgive our husbands, our children, our parents, or our brothers and sisters in Christ. I have never had anyone sin against me 490 times in one day, but I think I have come close to remembering someone's sin against me that many times in a day. Sometimes when we are left alone to our thoughts, perhaps in the dark of the night, or some other long, contemplative time, we dwell on the hurts of the past. They rise up in us like an angry snake. When an unforgiving spirit repeatedly rises up within us, we must overcome it through confession and application, once again, of the forgiveness of Christ.

- 3. Hebrews 8:12,** *“FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE.”*
Psalms 103:12, *“As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”*

When Jesus forgives us, our sins are no longer an issue in our relationship with Him. Our sin is forgotten and moved from us as far as the east is from the west. (The east and west never meet, by the way!)

When we forgive others, it frees us to move on from the sin that has been committed against us. In ongoing relationships, such as a marriage, the sin does not need to continue to be brought up between us and the other party. That's freedom! We need to deal with people where they are in the present, not in the failure of their past. Remember, forgiveness cancels the past. Again, I am so

thankful that Gene and I have grown in our maturity to the point where we are able to forgive each other more freely, more quickly, and more completely. The forgiveness of Christ in a marriage relationship spares it from angry outbursts or long hours of silence. It delivers husbands from those “you-can-just-sleep-on-the-couch” moments!

4. **Ephesians 1:7–8**, *“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight ...”*

We do not deserve the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, nor is there anything we can do to earn it. Forgiveness is given to us as a gift when we believe in Him. I love the word used in this verse, “lavish.” It is the Greek word *perriseuo* and speaks of a downpour, a superabundance in both quality and quantity, something that is superfluous and extravagant. This is the nature of God’s grace toward us in Christ!

We do not show forgiveness to others because they deserve it; we show it as a gift in reflection of the character of Jesus Christ. Nor should we ask them to work to earn our forgiveness. Forgiveness is unconditional. If Jesus lavishes His grace on us, it seems only right that we could show more than a trace of grace to others!

5. **1 Peter 2:24**, *“and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for **by His wounds** you were healed.”*

Jesus paid the ultimate price for our sins: death on the cross. His love drove Him to suffer greatly in order to buy our freedom.

When we are willing to forgive others, it doesn’t mean we are overlooking the sin or saying it doesn’t matter. We are

saying that we are willing to bear the pain and suffering that accompanies that sin. We are willing to carry the burden of another's sin because Jesus carries the burden of our sin (1 Peter 5:7; Matthew 11:28).

6. **John 8:11b**, *“And Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on **sin no more.**’”*

We already looked at this example earlier in the lesson. But I just want to use it here to reiterate one important point of reflecting the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. The forgiveness of Jesus Christ gives us an opportunity for confession and correction, to learn from our failures, and to move on to victory.

In the same way, we should encourage others to learn from sin and failure and to turn to Christ for correction. There is opportunity to minister to the person who has hurt us and show them the way to pick up and move on in God's grace.

7. **Luke 7:47**, *“For this reason I say to you [He is speaking to another arrogant Pharisee], **her sins which are many have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.**”*

The sinful woman of Luke 7, knowing how much she needed the forgiveness of Christ, loved Him far beyond the reach of the Pharisee's "love," for he did not realize His great need for Christ. Forgiveness builds love in a relationship.

When we are willing and able to forgive others, it builds a bond of love between us that is sometimes stronger than before the breach of trust.

8. **2 Corinthians 5:14–19**, *“For the **love of Christ controls** [compels] **us, having concluded this, that one died for all,***

*therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, **he is a new creature**; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation**, namely, that God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”*

At times it seems very difficult to forgive another person who has greatly sinned against you. Actually, humanly speaking, it is nearly impossible. But when we depend on the love of Christ to be the power of our forgiveness, we are calling on a love far beyond ours—a love great enough to forgive the sins of the whole world!

When we consider others as souls that Christ was willing to die for, what grounds do we have not to forgive? If they are believers, they are “new creatures in Christ”; if they are unbelievers, we have the opportunity to show them the love of Christ in a way they may never have seen before!

We each are given a ministry—it is the “*ministry of reconciliation*,” meaning “a bringing together of two separated parties.” In relationships where there has been a breaking of fellowship through sin on the part of one party or both, the goal to strive for is reconciliation. That is always God’s desire. But sometimes only one party seeks after reconciliation. I would encourage you to be the party willing to reconcile, and pray for others to come to that same desire. To God be the glory!

9. Romans 8:1–2, *“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”*

We all have a past of some sort—some sordid sort! Some people are more prone to guilt and shame than others. But the Word of God freely assures us that *“in Christ Jesus”* there is no more condemnation for sin! You may not be struggling with forgiving someone else, but you may be struggling with forgiving your own self. If so, go back through the above verses speaking about the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ and, please, apply them to yourself.

The moment we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, all condemnation from sin is gone, finished, erased—nailed to the cross and considered as naught. The price, the penalty, and the pain of every sin was demolished by the work of God’s holy Son. He instantly sets us free from sin and guilt so that we can, indeed, be free.

Shout, *“Hallelujah!”* Rejoice! Jump up and down with joy—you are free! Live in light of that freedom.

Perhaps one of the greatest expressions of forgiveness I have ever heard was written on a tattered piece of paper and found in the clothing of a dead child at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. It goes like this:

“Lord, remember not only the men and women of good-will but also those of ill-will, but do not remember all of the suffering that they have inflicted upon us. Instead, remember the fruits that we have borne because of this suffering; our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this

trouble. When our persecutors come to be judged by you let all of those fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.”

These words just make me want to cry. To cry for the terrible suffering this child endured, to cry for the evil that this world can inflict on body and soul, to cry with longing for that same kind of mature and gracious love to penetrate my own heart. The words of this child put me to shame. This is a boy who had lost his childhood, his peace, his health, his joy, and his very future to evil men.

This amazing young man was able to see what he had gained from both his suffering and the opportunity to forgive. He looked at how he had grown in character and integrity and in relationship with God—how God had opened his heart and allowed His grace to take root and bloom there. From the suffering inflicted by evil men, he had gained friends and learned loyalty and courage. He focused not on his personal suffering but on the fruit that the suffering had brought in his life.

For just a moment, I want you to ponder on the most difficult thing that you have ever had to forgive—the very thing that you may wish had never happened to you, that you may wish could be erased from the chalkboard of your heart. Whatever you are pondering on may be the very thing God uses to draw you to Him! That very thing could end up being your greatest blessing because of the strength and dignity you gained from the trial. Often our greatest ministry grows out of our deepest suffering.

Corrie Ten Boom was greatly hurt in the persecution of Christians in WWII. She suffered long and hard in a concentration camp that took the life of her sister. After the war was over, she struggled with forgiveness and asked a pastor how to deal with the bitterness in her heart. This is the counsel he gave her:

“Forgiveness is like letting go of a bell rope. If you have ever seen a country church with a bell in the steeple, you will remember that to get the bell ringing you have to tug awhile. Once it has begun to ring, you merely maintain the momentum. As long as you keep pulling, the bell keeps ringing. Forgiveness is letting go of the rope. It is just that simple. But when you do so, the bell keeps ringing. Momentum is still at work. However, if you keep your hands off the rope, the bell will begin to slow and eventually stop.”

The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is dressed in “*strength and dignity,*” and “*she smiles at the future.*” If your smile has been turned upside down by a broken heart—an infliction of pain from someone else’s failure—I would encourage you to embrace the love of Christ and reflect that love through forgiveness. When the fountain of His forgiveness flows through you, it is the first step to healing that broken heart.

We are only able to smile at the future when we have dealt with the past. Forgive in the same way that Christ has forgiven you!

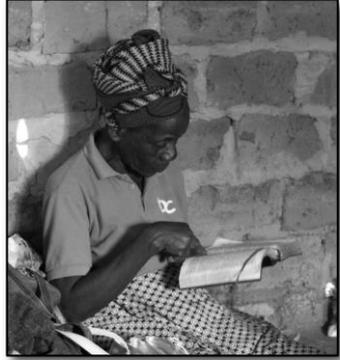
Lesson Sixteen: Wisdom

“She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”

Proverbs 31:26



Verse 26 starts with the Hebrew letter *pe*. *Pe* pictures an **open mouth** and speaks of **feeding on God’s Word**.



The woman of honor is a channel for God’s Word.

When I met my husband at the age of seventeen, I was an unbeliever. I was occasionally taken to church as a child, we read the account of Jesus’ birth at Christmas, and thanked God for our food before every meal. When my grandfather died, my mother assured me he was in Heaven. I thought I was a Christian because I had been told I was a Christian.

Shortly after I met Gene, I went to work at a ski resort in the mountains of Colorado. It was only a summer job, but during those few short months, he wrote me letters—love letters that told me of his desire to be my spiritual leader, my protector, and friend. He continually spoke to me in those letters of God’s love, the good news of the Gospel, and principles from God’s Word. He presented Christ to me in a way I had never seen before. It was like he knew Jesus Christ as a Person, and I wanted the conviction, confidence, and truth that he held. Sometime during the span of that Rocky Mountain summer, I fell in love with the two most important men in my life: Gene Cunningham and the God-Man, Christ Jesus! I read those love letters over and over again. I pondered on his words and treasured them in my heart. All these years later, I still have those letters.

The Bible is God’s eternal love letter written to my heart and yours. It speaks of His desire for us to open the doors of our soul to His love; it speaks of His desire to be our spiritual Leader, Protector, and Friend. It leads us in the paths of righteousness and blessing, and delivers us from inordinate love for a fallen world. It is the invitation from our heavenly Husband to dance the divine romance that lasts for eternity. We should read this love letter over and over again, ponder and meditate on its principles, and treasure them in our heart.

We should be drawn daily to the beauty of God’s Word, strengthened by its power, and motivated by its wisdom. We are to have more than just an intellectual knowledge and understanding of the Bible, for its living power is meant to pierce into the depths of our soul—to change our thinking, our priorities, and our purposes in life. Once the Word of God has permeated our own heart, we are meant to use it to reach the hearts of others. As we grow in Christ, we should become a channel of God’s Word as it goes from His heart to ours, and then, from our heart to another’s. Proverbs 31:26 speaks of this open channel. The virtuous woman is able to open her mouth in wisdom and teach others of the kindness of God because she has first feasted on God’s Word for her own soul.

There is another passage in the Book of Proverbs that expounds on this principle. It is found in Proverbs 9 where the Word of God compares and contrasts the character of a wise woman versus a foolish woman. Let’s look at these ladies and learn from their victories and mistakes.

The Path of Wisdom

“Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars; she has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table; she has sent out her maidens, she calls from the tops of the heights of the city; ‘Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!’ To him who lacks under-

standing she says, 'Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake your folly and live, and proceed in the way of understanding.'"
Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs is personified as a woman. As we look more closely at these verses, pay attention to the imagery that the Spirit of God uses to help us understand the woman of wisdom. The verses are very graphic. God is a very visual Teacher because He knows most of us are visual learners. Perhaps you have already pictured in your mind the house of the wise woman.

Proverbs 9:1: Stand!

This verse describes the stand the wise woman has taken in her personal life. We cannot hope to point others to the truth of God's Word if we have not taken a stand for it in our own life. This woman has wisely separated herself from what is worthless in this world in order to seek and stand for the precious. She has decided for herself that wisdom is the path she will pursue in her life, and the structure of her house reflects that decision:

- The word *"built"* indicates the house is well or attractively formed.
- The words *"hewn out"* indicate the application of skill and the investment of time to build something both sturdy and attractive.
- Her skill and time have resulted in a house of *"seven pillars,"* the number seven indicating completion, perfection, and strength.
- Consider 1 Peter 2:5:

"You ... are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

- Consider Matthew 7:24:

“Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man [or woman] who built his house upon the rock.”

Proverbs 9:2: Prepare!

The wise woman’s skill and time are now applied to the table of her home. After taking a stand for wisdom, she prepares a feast in order to have something to share with others. Again, think of the imagery:

- She has “*prepared*” her food, which actually means she has “slaughtered the slaughter.” This is not hot dogs and chips on a paper plate. She has prepared the finest of meats to present a feast with sustenance, nutrition, and flavor. As my husband and I travel to remote and poor places in the world, we often receive great hospitality from the people we visit. They always try to give us their best. In cultures that are meat-deprived, that means they will sacrifice whatever is necessary to provide us with a bit of protein. It may be sautéed goat intestines or a roasted bat, but it is protein!
- “*She has mixed her wine*” to strengthen and flavor it.
- She has “*set her table*” by arrangement and beautification—presentation, presentation, presentation!
- The food referred to in this passage represents the offering of truth to others.
- Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 4:4:

“It is written, ‘MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.’”

- Consider Psalm 119:103:

“How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”

Proverbs 9:3–6: Pursuit!

In these verses, we see that her preparations have a purpose as she actively pursues ministry:

- She *“calls from ... the heights of the city.”* The word *“calls”* means “to summon or shout.” The wisdom of her life is now calling out from *“the heights of the city”* as she seeks to share **life** (both eternal and abundant) with those in need. There is no greater need in this life than the need for understanding God and His Word. This woman of wisdom is ready to share it because she has a compassionate concern for the souls of other people.
- She seeks to minister to the *“naive,”* or one who lacks understanding. In Scripture, naivety or ignorance often has a moral as well as an intellectual connotation. This wise woman is ready to minister to the spiritual need of another—whether that need is for instruction, reproof, correction, encouragement, or strength. Because our present-day society is so far removed from biblical standards, young people often do not even know that premarital sex is sin, or that homosexuality is not a legitimate expression of desire in God’s sight. We must pursue the presentation of truth to a world that no longer has respect for the absolutes of God’s Word.
- Consider Colossians 4:6:

“Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how to respond to each person.”

Application

With these graphic images of the wise woman in our minds, let's make application in our own life. Ask yourself these questions:

- Have I taken an active stand to learn and use the wisdom of God's Word? Am I diligently and daily seeking His truth and standing upon its firm foundation? Do I rate the quality of my spiritual life by how many "tapes" I have listened to, how many notebooks I have filled, or do I rate it by the intimacy of my relationship with Christ and my willingness to surrender to Him?
- Am I adorning the doctrine of God in such a way that people are hungry for what I have prepared? Do I care about the souls of others and their need to hear the truth of God's Word? Do I set an attractive table of God's Word for my husband, my children, my family? The people who live within the walls of your own home are your first mission field!
- Are the doors of my life flung wide open to invite others in for counsel and encouragement? Am I actively seeking to bless others through service, encouragement, teaching, and prayer? Or am I idly sitting on the sidelines, twiddling my thumbs 'til Jesus comes?

The one thing that is not included in the description of the wise woman is the result of her ministry. She calls out for people to come in order to share understanding with them. But life teaches us that not all will respond to that call. Of all the passersby who hear her invitation, we are not told how many respond. Still she considers it worthwhile to take a stand in her life and offer the overflow of her wisdom to those in need. We should too! Life and ministry can often be discouraging, but don't lose hope because the eyes of Jesus roam to and fro (2 Chronicles 16:9) within the walls of our heart and home. He knows our devotion to Him even when we don't see the fruit!

The Path of Folly

“The woman of folly is boisterous, she is naive, and knows nothing. she sits at the doorway of her house, on a seat by the high places of the city, calling to those who pass by, who are making their paths straight: ‘Whoever is naive, let him turn in here,’ and to him who lacks understanding she says, ‘stolen water is sweet; and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.” Proverbs 9:13–18

The Spirit of God once again uses imagery to set a stark contrast between the heart and ministry of the wise woman and that of the foolish woman.

Proverbs 9:13: No Stand!

The woman of folly has taken no stand in her own life; therefore, she lacks stability, maturity, and strength.

The word “*folly*” refers to “stupidity due to disdain for God’s truth.” Again, it is not judgment on her intellect as much as judgment on her moral and spiritual character. She does not have an “open mouth” that is hungry to feed on God’s Word. This word can also refer to being silly or simple.

Proverbs 9:14: No Preparation!

While the wise woman is busily making preparation, the foolish woman is **sitting!**

The words used here imply apathy and laziness resulting in wasting the years, days, and precious opportunities of her life. “Like sands through the hour glass,” so are the days of the foolish woman. I find it interesting that they are now discovering that the physical act of sitting for long periods of time is one of the most

detrimental things you can do to the health of your body. In keeping with that, “spiritual sitting” is one of the most detrimental things you can do for the health of your soul.

Proverbs 9:16–18: Pursues Death!

The foolish woman also calls out to those who pass by. Unfortunately, she calls out with the offer of death—not life! She desires to lead others in the path she has taken, a path leading to the death of understanding, fellowship, and productivity—a dead-end path of sin.

Before we leave the principles found in Proverbs 9, it is important to examine the verses that separate the descriptions of the wise and the foolish woman. These verses are very pointed and convicting, clarifying for us the underlying difference between them.

Teachability

“He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you, reprove a wise man and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you.”

Proverbs 9:7–11

The difference between the wise and foolish woman is not how much knowledge they have for the Word of God (though that is very important), but how much they let the Word of God correct and change their thoughts, motives, words, deeds, and life. The striking difference between one woman and the next is not knowledge, but teachability! The willingness to take rebuke and

correction is crucial to the gaining of wisdom in our life. “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*” (Psalm 111:10).

To sit at the feet of a spiritual leader, pastor, or Bible teacher is imperative for our spiritual life. But sitting should not be the only posture of a disciple of Christ. We are also to walk in the truth, to “*run with endurance the race set before us,*” and “*to stand firm*” in the face of the enemy (Ephesians 5:15; Hebrews 12:1–3; Ephesians 6:11). The sitting down to learn is the first step—but not the last step!

Let’s open not only our ears to hear the Word of God, but also our hearts to be changed and renewed by it and the working of His Spirit in our lives. When others (yes, even our husbands) give criticism or correction to our lives, it is easy to resent their words and reject their views. This reaction comes from arrogance of soul. We would fare much better if we were to humbly consider their words and, if needed, make the necessary corrections in our lives. Age and experience should never be an excuse for apathy toward God’s Word. If we think we know enough or have grown enough, the Lord will faithfully show us our own folly to stimulate us into further growth. Let’s remain teachable in order to be ready to teach and encourage others.

One of the greatest areas of teaching ministry available to a woman is with her own children. God places the responsibility for the spiritual health and welfare of sons and daughters onto the parents. Rightly so! It is a great responsibility coupled with a great privilege.

The Book of Deuteronomy was written to teach the people of God how to properly live before a holy and righteous God. Under God’s leadership, Moses gave instruction to the people in order that their children and grandchildren might live in the fear and obedience of the Lord, resulting in blessing and long life (Deuteronomy 6:1–3). I think we would all agree that we want this for ourselves, our sons, grandsons, daughters, and granddaughters. Deuteronomy 6:4–7 says this:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

There is some parallel here with the passage of the wise woman in Proverbs 9. She first took a stand for truth in her own life before she was ready to call from “*the heights of the city*” to those passing by. In the same way, this passage in Deuteronomy encourages us to first love the Lord our God in our own heart in order to live out the love of the Lord our God to our children. The process starts with self. Moses then commands the people to teach their own children with diligence and consistency. If we are opening our mouth in wisdom to our children when we sit in our house, when we walk by the way (or drive down the highway), when we lie down and when we rise up, we are pretty much in full-time ministry to our children. That is God’s design!

Our words and our life should marry up in a harmonious message of who God is and what He has done for us. We need to be passionate about our relationship with God and let our children and grandchildren see that passion so as to ignite the same passion in them. Let your children see your **love** for the Lord your God by the way you **live** for the Lord your God!

This message is repeated six times in Deuteronomy, each passage having a little different wording or emphasis. God doesn’t have dementia; when He repeats something it is because He really wants us to get it. Compare this Deuteronomy 6 passage with Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:20–25; 11:18–21; 31:12–13; and 32:46. I wonder how well Israel did at following these commands. Judges 2 answers that question for us. Judges 2:7–8 read as follows:

“The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten.”

Joshua and his generation were strong in their faith and pursuit of God. It seems a bit of a conundrum, but the following verses indicate that they failed in one critical area. Judges 2:10–12a tells us that:

*“All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who **did not know the LORD**, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers ...”*

The same generation that stood firm in their own faith gave birth to a generation that did not know the Lord, but forsook him for dead idolatry. Where was the execution of Deuteronomy 6:4–7 in their lives? Excuse me, but this sounds a whole lot like America today!

Now, I understand that good parenting is only one part of the equation. Children, as they grow, have volition of their own to choose to follow or forsake God. Certainly we have had some issues with our own children from time to time, and certainly we have failed at times to love the Lord our God before their very eyes. If children have been raised to trust Christ and love their God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and then turn away from Him, the condemnation is theirs. But if we fail, as parents, to instill the love of God into their young hearts, the condemnation is ours.

Father God, help us as Christian parents and grandparents in America, Australia, and around the world to lead our children into an intimate relationship with You!

Not everyone reading this lesson will have children. Some are barren and, difficult as it may be, that needs to be accepted as from the Lord—whatever His reason. Others choose not to bear children. But if you are without children, consider the impact you can have on kids who are spiritual orphans, having no parents of their own who will display Christ to them. Even children who are raised in Christian homes by Christian parents sometimes just don't get it until another adult comes alongside them and mentors them in Jesus Christ. When they see it and hear it in someone besides their parents, it begins to make sense to them.

There are many open doors of ministry available to those who want to spiritually adopt the children of this world, to open their mouths in wisdom, and let the teaching of kindness be on their tongue.

There are so many places we could go with this verse in Proverbs 31, so many passages that speak of the power of the tongue for good or evil. Jesus is the manifestation of kindness. Let His words and His love be on our lips, in our words, and in our lives. Let's regularly feed on God's Word in order to have a word of wisdom, grace, and encouragement for those around us!

“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances. Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear.” Proverbs 25:11–12

Lesson Seventeen: Harvest

“She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.”

Proverbs 31:27



Verse 27 starts with the Hebrew letter *tsadhe*. *Tsadhe* pictures a **reaping hook** and speaks of a **fruitful harvest**.



The woman of honor bears fruit in her own home.

In 2015, I spent a month with my daughter in Perth. It was a joyful and rich time as I watched her care for her one-year-old and three-year-old and give birth to her third child—a healthy and happy little baby boy. Katie’s life is so full right now: full of smiles and laughter and swings at the park, full of diapers, spilled milk and sleepless nights! Each day brings both joys and challenges; each moment shapes the minds and hearts of tender lives. My dear daughter, like so many other devoted wives and mothers around this world, is not eating the *“bread of idleness,”* but looking *“well to the ways of her household.”* She is bearing fruit for both time and eternity from within the walls of her own home. Home is where our mission begins.

On the long flight home from Australia, I started reading the book, *Natural Born Heroes* by Christopher McDougall. The author examines the lives of many heroes throughout history, most of them tucked away in some corner of the world—just living a very vanilla life—until one day they are confronted with a crisis. And then, suddenly, off comes the work shirt, the tie, or the apron, and out comes the “Superman” within! McDougall spends some time debating what transforms a “nobody” into a “somebody” and comes up with this conclusion, *“compassion!”* He says:

“Heroes care. True heroism, as the ancients understood, isn’t about strength, or boldness, or even courage. It’s about compassion. When the Greeks created the heroic ideal, they didn’t choose a word that meant ‘dies trying’ or ‘massacres bad guys.’ They went with the word ‘heroes,’ ‘protector.’ Heroism isn’t some mysterious inner virtue, the Greeks believed; it’s a collection of skills that every man and woman can master, so that in a pinch they can become a Protector.”

I started thinking about his conclusion in relation to this lesson. Because I believe every wife and mother, who truly seeks to live within the walls of her home with virtue and faith, has donned the Superman costume. She is a hero and protector for her husband and children. The love of Christ drives her to daily lay aside self and minister to those she loves. It takes work, it takes devotion, it takes energy, time and sacrifice, it takes patience, and it takes compassion! We rarely even use the term “housewife” anymore, but I think I, too, am ready to trade it in for something a little more meaningful—how about “house-hero”?

In the book of Titus, the Apostle Paul is writing to instruct Titus on how to get the Church in order, for the glory of Jesus Christ. He gives special instruction to elders, older men, older women, younger men, younger women, and bond-slaves. Here is his admonition to the older women:

“Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God may not be dishonored.”

Titus 2:3–5

I consider this passage to be the Proverbs 31 of the New Testament. Isn't it interesting that in a letter instructing Titus on how to get the Church in order, the majority of Paul's instruction to the woman relates to her function within the home—not the Church. Why? Because the virtue of the woman adds virtue to the marriage; the virtue of a marriage adds virtue to the family; and the virtue of families adds virtue to the whole Body of Christ.

Weak marriages lead to weak families, and weak families lead to a weak Church. If there are problems in relationships between husbands and wives, they very often spill over into the local congregation, and others are adversely affected. I have seen churches split over problems with only one family. On the other hand, strong marriages lead to strong families, and strong families lead to a strong Church.

Let's take the pieces of this verse apart to better understand Paul's instruction. He begins in Titus 2:3 by describing three characteristics an older woman should strive to display. She is to be:

1. “*reverent*”

The Greek word used here means “holy” or “temple-fitting.” The woman's behavior should be respectable, as if she is living and serving in the temple (e.g., Anna in Luke 2). Our soul is now the temple of the living God (1 Corinthians 6:19)—live accordingly!

2. “*not malicious gossip[s]*”

Gossip is not fitting behavior for a member of the Body of Christ and is likened to a flame that can destroy a mighty forest (James 3:5–6). Gossip, too, can destroy families, friendships, and churches!

3. “*nor enslaved to much wine*”

We are not to be drunkards. By application, our lives should be free from enslavement to earthly pleasures. It's not that we can't enjoy a glass of wine or a chocolate chip

cookie now and then, but we are not to be enslaved to them. Discipline your body for the sake of godliness!

The older woman should have these characteristics in her life not only to be pleasing to Jesus Christ, but in order to invest her life in teaching others. Paul's next instruction exhorts us to do these things in order to have a godly influence on younger women. In Titus 2:3b–4, we are to both “teach” and “*encourage*” the younger women:

4. “*teaching what is good*”

The Greek word used here is *kalodidaskolos*. It is a compound word from *kalo*, which means “good, valuable, or virtuous” and *didaskalos*, which is “to instruct, to master, to teach.” As older women, we are to be virtuous in our own life in order to teach virtue to others.

5. “*encourage the young women*”

The Greek word used here is *sophranizo*, meaning “to make sober-minded, to recall a person to their senses, to give sound thinking, to school or train.” It is in the present tense, meaning we should keep on doing it as a daily activity.

In this passage, Paul instructs us all to be teachers of God's Word. Some women have a gift and platform to verbally teach God's Word in a public setting. But biblical teaching is not limited to that platform. I think the main thrust of Paul's instruction here is to encourage women to teach by example! Paul, himself, said, “*Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ,*” 1 Corinthians 11:1. Imitation is one of the greatest teachers.

I learned so much from my mother-in-law Ruth. She never taught me a Bible class, never sat and opened the Word and instructed me in it. But through 35 years of observing her love for serving Jesus by serving others, I learned so much. She taught by example. Her life was a Bible class with hands and feet!

My first pastor's wife, Janet Miller, is now aged and widowed, but she is one of the most faithful prayer warriors I have ever known. Her life is a Bible class to me, exhorting me to run my race strong and to never quit short of the finish line!

I could go on and name many other women who have been my teachers in life, teaching not by lecture and word, but by attitude and example.

We are all teachers of life by our lives. You don't have to be an old person to do this. There is always someone younger around us who is watching, considering, and imitating our values, attitudes, actions, and reactions. After we are gone, what remains of our life will be found in the lives of those we have taught.

In our home, we have a little framed quote that I cherish. It says, "*Teach, and Touch the Future.*" In this passage, Paul is encouraging us to do just that!

Paul then goes on in Titus 2:4–5 to continue explaining what the older women should teach the younger:

6. "to love their husbands"

The word for "love" here is from the Greek word *philandros*, a compound word from *philos*, which refers to love between friends or associates and *aner*, which means "fellow, husband, or man." Our husband is to be our "man-friend"! Let's learn a principle: the Spirit of God is encouraging us, as women, to share the likes, passions, and interests of our husbands. You know when he wants you to hang out in the garage while he changes the oil? Sit on the couch during the Super Bowl—even for the commercials? Sleep in a tent in freezing weather so you can watch him skin out a deer?

Most guys love it when their wives go outside their own feminine comfort zone to "hang out" with them. We are encouraged not only to love him in a sexual manner, but

in every day friendship-love. Don't just be his lover, be his companion, his associate in life, and his friend—his best friend!

As a young wife, this verse baffled me. After all, if I didn't love my husband, I wouldn't have married him. But as time went on, I gained insight into what Paul was instructing women to do. There comes a time in life and in marriage when you have to love based on a decision to love and based on obedience to God's Word, rather than on emotions and feelings. Emotions are powerful, but they are also fickle.

Proverbs 17:17 says, "*A friend loves at all times.*" To truly be a friend to someone, it takes the power of the love of Christ—an unconditional love that looks beyond what the person has to offer you—and looks to what you can offer the other person because of who you are in Jesus Christ. From this love flows forgiveness, acceptance, and assurance that you will be there for them in the ups and downs of life. Older women need to be ready to guide younger women through this time with understanding and wisdom.

7. "to love their children"

Again, the word used for love is from *phileo*—apply the same principle toward your children. To take an interest in their lives, to nurture their gifts and goals is a virtuous thing for a mother to do. Love, in regard to child-raising, also involves training them up in God's Word, as well as the teaching of discipline and obedience.

8. "sensible"

This refers to self-control and wisdom. The older woman has the wisdom that comes with experience, is able to understand and communicate the consequences of bad decisions and, therefore, encourage good decisions.

9. “*pure*”

This refers to moral purity and modesty. In considering the application of this verse to your life, don’t just brush by this one. Let’s compare this verse with 1 Timothy 2:9–10:

“Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.”

Here, Paul encourages women to dress in a modest manner. One thing that extensive travel in many areas of the world has taught me is that modesty differs from culture to culture. What is considered modest in an American church would be considered bold and brazen in an Indian church. Yet, Americans would be taken aback if a young woman came walking into the church with “the pantry” wide open, like nursing mothers in Africa often do.

According to the standards of our culture, we should dress in a modest way that does not attract undue attention to our sexuality—especially in the Church! My husband is very fond of the saying, “Every woman should be a kitten in public, and a tiger in private.” Mull that one over in your mind!

10. “*workers at home*”

The Greek word used here actually means “domestically inclined.” Many women work outside the home in today’s society. Paul is not taking a chauvinistic stand here and encouraging women to remain inside the home—barefoot and pregnant. He is encouraging women to recognize the value of their “housework.” To keep the house clean and in order adds to the health and stability of the family and the pleasure and comfort of the home.

Housework can be some of the most frustrating work on the planet because it is never done! There will never be

that perfect someday when everything is crossed off your list. Isn't it at least comforting to know that if we work within our home—whether it be dusting, laundry, cooking, dishes, or whatever—if we are domestically inclined, we are fulfilling the commands of Scripture.

These simple tasks (which are often routine, mundane, and boring), when done with an attitude of submission to God's Word, are transformed from work into ministry. Since the housework needs to be done anyway, we might as well do it "as unto the Lord" (Colossians 3:23) and receive His approval for our efforts.

This verse was written about 2,000 years ago. Think about how many women, all over the world over the past 20 centuries, have cleaned their houses, cooked the meals, and washed the clothes. From mud huts to mansions, from log cabins to nomad tents, women have labored to care for their families. For centuries, the eyes of God have moved through the homes of these lands, and He recognizes their work. His eyes move within the walls of your home as well. Your husband may come home and not even notice that you spent the whole day cleaning—but the Lord does!

11. "*kind*"

Kindness is part of the fruit of the Spirit and an outpouring of love (see Galatians 5:18 and Ephesians 4:32).

12. "*subject to their own husbands*"

I think it is important to consider here the use of the word "*own*." The Greek word for "*own*" is *idios*, meaning "separate, private, relating to self." Your husband is your own private, separate husband; he belongs to **you** and no one else. And someone else's husband is their own private, separate husband; he belongs to **her** and no one else!

There is such a danger and temptation in life to be infatuated with someone else's husband instead of your own. We see other men at their best, and our husband at his worst. Let me warn you, it only leads to heartache and ruin! The moment you find yourself dwelling on being a "friend" (or more) to some man other than your own, start running! Fast! Confess those thoughts and flee as far away from them as you can.

Likewise, if someone else's own, private husband approaches you with words or flirtations that are inappropriate, continue to run! Guard your thoughts, guard your words, guard your desires, and guard your actions. Over the course of my life, I have seen so many young women really wound their own heart and future by getting involved—emotionally or sexually—with someone else's own, private husband.

As a matter of fact, this might be a good place to consider the admonishment from the Lord given in 1 Peter 2:11, "*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers, to abstain from fleshly lusts that wage war against your own soul.*" The urgent command here is "*to abstain from fleshly lusts.*" The word "*abstain*" in the Greek means "to keep away from, to be distant from." It would be exactly the opposite of "flirting with or entertaining" fleshly lusts.

And then Peter gives us three reasons "*to abstain from fleshly lusts.*" The first reason is found in the word "*beloved.*" Because we are children of God, we should behave as children of God by walking in obedience to God's Word.

The second reason Peter gives is found in the words "*aliens and strangers.*" This world is not our home for we are positionally seated with Christ in the heavenlies. Therefore, we are to behave as citizens of Heaven, not as citizens of this world. We don't have to be like "all the other girls"! It is an honor to be different, to be set apart to a higher standard than the world holds.

And finally, Peter tells us that fleshly lusts “*wage war against the soul.*” That is a powerful statement that should bring us to a place of fear of falling into fleshly lusts. When we sexually fall into the heart and hands of some man other than our own, we might as well be taking a shot gun, pointing it at our own soul, and pulling the trigger! We wage war against ourselves!

Submission should also be taught through our words, attitude, and example. We need to teach and display the privilege and beauty of submission according to 1 Peter 3 (see Lesson 13).

Now, with all of these admonitions in mind, let’s get to what I consider to be the most powerful part of Titus 2:3–5. The very last phrase says:

“so that the word of God will not be dishonored.”

The Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God. It is the mind of Christ sitting before us in written form. It is to be more treasured than silver or gold, sweeter to the taste than the finest of honey. God breathed His life into every word, every page, and every principle. It is the Bread of Life to nourish our soul and the Sword of the Lord to pierce our soul. The Word of God is “alive and powerful” (Hebrews 4:12)! To have the opportunity of honoring the greatest treasure in the world by living a virtuous life is a privilege beyond my comprehension. This is the privilege of a fruitful harvest within the walls of our own homes. This is a divine motivation: to face every day and every task with purpose and passion!

Let’s summarize Titus 2:3–5 in the positive:

- When we live with reverence and discipline, we honor God’s Word.
- When we teach and encourage others, we honor God’s Word.
- When we show the love of God to our husbands and children, we honor God’s Word.

- When we live with wisdom and self-control, we honor God's Word.
- When we are morally pure and modest, we honor God's Word.
- When we are "domestically inclined," we honor God's Word.
- When we are kind to others, we honor God's Word.
- When we are submissive to our husbands, we honor God's Word.

Ladies, we sometimes think we have a mundane, ho-hum life, right? This phrase, "*so that the Word of God may not be dishonored*," kicks that idea right out the door! And I say, "good riddance!" To be a "house-hero" is not a ho-hum life. It is the divine calling of the woman of honor!

Lesson Eighteen: Praise

“Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: ‘Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.’”

Proverbs 31:28–29



Verse 28 starts with the Hebrew letter *qaph*. *Qaph* pictures the **back of the head** and speaks of **remembrance**.

Verse 29 begins with the Hebrew letter *resh*. *Resh* is a picture of the **front of the head** and speaks of **knowledge**.

The woman of honor receives blessing and praise.

Ah, the blessings of being a mother! It begins with that first little touch of skin-upon-skin, all warm and wet out of the womb, the unveiling of a mysterious little face you have waited months to behold, the cuddling up of a gummy little mouth on your breast, all hungry for mama’s milk. With each new “milestone” in a baby’s life, the mother is excited and proud: “he smiled” ... “he rolled over” ... “he’s sitting up, crawling, walking!” Indeed, the blessings of being a mother begin at birth, but as the life of a child progresses towards adulthood, we encounter many difficulties as well, as we strive to “*train [him] up ... in the way he should go,*” Proverbs 22:6.

In the first 18 verses (Proverbs 31:10–27) of this chapter, we have been challenged to strive for feminine virtue that is precious in God’s sight. “Challenged” might be the nice way of putting it; for if you are like me, you may have felt slapped in the face or kicked in the guts by the conviction of God’s Word as it relates to the principles of Proverbs 31. There remains so much room for improvement! The Word of God is meant to rattle our cages and

lure us outside of our comfort zone that we might never be complacent with our spiritual life, but strive to “*excel still more*” (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

However, the last four verses are verses of encouragement as they express for us the temporal blessing and eternal reward of a virtuous life. As we strive to live out the commands of the God we love, it is encouraging to know that our labor is not in vain. Because God is so gracious, there is encouragement, blessing, and eternal reward for what we do with the physical and spiritual assets God has given us.

The first encouragement comes from the children of the virtuous woman, written in Proverbs 31:28, “*Her children rise up and bless her.*”

The Hebrew word for “*rise up*” is *qam*. It can have several meanings but one of them is “to come to fruition.” A child can certainly be a blessing to both mother and father throughout their life, but the greatest blessing is received when they have grown to adulthood and are walking in a godly path, producing their own fruit that brings glory to God. Nothing can be more satisfying to a parent than to see their children walk in truth. Even as the Apostle John declared in 3 John 4:

“I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

I was sharing the Word of God in a very poor church in India one Sunday morning, and afterward had a conversation with the pastor and his wife. He said something I will never forget, “*I have four sons, and I pray that God will send them to the four corners of the earth with the Gospel.*” There were many needs and wishes this poor elderly couple could have shared with me, but the thing that was flowing out of their heart and sitting on the tip of their tongue was their desire to see their sons walk in God’s will for their life. I love that attitude!

Our children are ours for the raising; but they are not ours for the keeping! They belong to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and are meant to grow to be His servant. In light of this, let's consider Psalm 127:1–5:

“Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LORD guards the city, the watchmen keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in His sleep.

Behold, children are a gift of the LORD; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; they shall not be ashamed, when they speak with their enemies in the gate.”

This psalm is a family psalm, probably penned by Solomon. It reminds us that to exhaust ourselves in striving for our family with disregard to God in our life, is vanity. The Hebrew word actually implies evil. The human hand laboring to build a home without the help of the divine hand is painful—not fruitful—labor. But as we live in fellowship with our Lord and labor for our family with His love and in trust of His care, the result is blessing from the Lord and the soul-rest that accompanies it. This psalm should be a daily reminder to serve, work, and build our family in the care of God, with His hands at the hammer—not our own.

In Psalm 127:3, the Hebrew words for “*children*” and “*gift*” both convey the idea of “heritage.” To pass on the works of the Lord to the next generation was a huge part of living in obedience to God in the Old Testament, as we discussed in Lesson 16. When we are faithful in doing this, our labor returns to us through the joy of knowing that God's Word will be lived out in the generations to come.

In Psalm 127:3–5, we are reminded of how very precious the life of a child is. Every child born into this world is “*a gift from God.*” Some parents don’t recognize their children as gifts, but as believers in Jesus Christ, we certainly should! The fruit of the womb is a reward!

In the last lesson, I mentioned spending time with my daughter as she gave birth to her third baby. Actually, I was there for the delivery and was the one that caught little Leuwen from my daughter’s womb! It was an amazing experience, and I just kept thinking, “Here is a new creation—this isn’t just a little baby, this is an **eternal** soul—what a gift from God!” If we daily look at our children as a gift, rather than a bucket load of work or an interruption in our lives, it would go a long way to give us patience and joy in raising them.

And then the passage says:

“Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth.”

I love this analogy, because arrows are the weapons of a warrior’s hand. They are sent out with accuracy to kill an enemy that is beyond their own reach. If the warrior has no training in archery, or if he has no target that he wants the arrow to reach, then his efforts are in vain. The arrow misses the mark! This passage is telling us that our children are to be sent out from our hands and from our heart like an arrow, to touch a place and a time that we cannot.

If we do not have a goal that we want their life to reach, then it doesn’t matter how we shoot them. But if we want them to hit the target of a life devoted to Jesus Christ, then we must raise them up to meet that target. We are to raise them to meet the spiritual enemy that ravages the world and the Church and threatens the health and stability of their own life. Let’s be diligent to shoot them out in a straight path—the path of service to the Lord. Is

there any greater blessing we could receive from a child than to know they “*are walking in the truth*”?

This psalm should challenge young mothers to raise their little ones with diligence and seriousness and to train them to hit the bull’s-eye of God’s will for their life. When Hannah gave birth to her little gift from God, Samuel, she knew exactly what he was destined to do, and she trained him in a very short time to hit that target of service in the house of God. The prayers of Hannah are mentioned three times in 1 Samuel 1.

When Hannah brought the boy Samuel to Eli to be dedicated, she said, “*For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD,*” 1 Samuel 1:27–28a.

Prayer for our children is a powerful part of training them in service to God. We not only need to pray **for** our children (and grandchildren), but we also need to pray **with** them, so that they verbally hear our request before God to take their life and use it for His glory. There was dedication and sacrifice on the part of both Hannah and Samuel, but Samuel grew to be a great prophet in Israel. Samuel rose up to bless Hannah’s life!

This psalm should also encourage older mothers who may be feeling the quiet pangs of an empty-nester. There is not a day that goes by that I don’t miss the sound of my children’s voices, the comfort of their hugs, the expressions of each special face. But far greater is the blessing of knowing that even though they are spread out around the world, they are touching a place and a time that I cannot. And now, as grandparents, we have the joy of watching them “*train up*” their own children in the way they should go, which is the crown of our old age (Proverbs 17:6)!

Let’s conclude this section of the lesson with this: There once was a little Jewish boy living in the land of Israel. One day, he went out to hear the Great Teacher speak, and he carried with him

a lunch. He shared his five little loaves and two little fishes with Jesus. The Lord Jesus took that child's lunch and multiplied it to feed thousands—with twelve baskets left over. Many people that day were fed, nourished, and blessed by what that little boy had to share with Jesus (John 6:9). What a blessing it must have been for his mother (whether she was present to see the miracle, or heard about it later) to know that her little boy was prepared and ready to share what he had with the Lord. She never would have imagined that the simple act of packing a lunch for her son would result in a miracle we still talk about today!

We never know how God may use each act of service from our hands for His glory. Live with virtue, raise your children in virtue, and they will eventually (through many ups and downs, fits and failures) come to fruition, and **you** will be blessed!

The second blessing the woman of honor receives is praise from the heart of her husband. A woman seems to respond tenderly to compliments and words of praise. The Spirit of God knows this and so the promise takes on that very form. As a young woman, this is something I desperately craved but seldom heard. However, through the years, I have grown in my love for Christ and the manifestation of it in our marriage, and so has my husband. The result is that he very often praises me, and it nourishes my soul. The word used for "*praise*" in Proverbs 31:28 indicates "to make a show about, to boast, to rave and to celebrate."

When the husband in this verse speaks his praise, he says, "*Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.*" The word for "*nobly*" is *chayil*, which you may remember from Proverbs 31:10 is the word used for "an honorable, excellent or virtuous woman." Proverbs 31 has come full circle.

In God's system of retribution, honor begets honor. When we strive to live our life honoring God's Word and His authority in our life, He brings that honor back to us. First Samuel 2:30 says, "*... for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed.*"

As an example, in our first full-time church, there was an elderly lady who faithfully attended every Bible class and occasionally played the piano in church services. Her husband had no interest in coming to church and was not even a believer. She never heard compliments, expressions of love from his mouth, or praise of any sort, until ... the day before he died, he was sitting in his recliner, looked up and said to her, “*You have been a good wife to me.*” This wasn’t exactly raving or boasting from this old man’s lips, but even from the mouth of an unbeliever, God brought forth His promised praise (see Isaiah 55:11). God is faithful!

Just as the poem begins with the divine price tag of an excellent wife being far better than jewels, it comes near to closing with the price tag of her life being a cause for celebration and praise! The word used for “*excel*” means “to ascend or to climb.” As we strive through the years of our life to attain biblical wisdom, and practically exercise it in our life, we “ascend” (or climb) closer and closer to the reality of living a virtuous life. A man may observe virtue in many women, but he will observe it in a more intimate way in the life of his own wife. When he does, she becomes to him the pinnacle of all women!

There is another principle that I want to explore in this lesson. Remember that verse 28 begins with the Hebrew letter *qaph*, which pictures the **back of the head** and speaks of **remembrance**. Verse 29 starts with the Hebrew letter *resh*, picturing the **front of the head** and speaks of **knowledge**.

With the combination of remembrance and knowledge, I would like to consider the importance of memory in our spiritual life. God has given us the ability to remember the past for a reason. We are **not** to live in the victories or the failures of our own past (Philippians 3:13), but we **are** to gain strength and perspective through remembering God’s faithfulness in our life.

This principle is perfectly illustrated in the life of Jeremiah. In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah is in the midst of a horrific time from both a personal and national standpoint. Jerusalem is

under siege by the Babylonians, and Jeremiah is watching the destruction of his land and people with his own eyes. He is witnessing the very national discipline that he so passionately warned the people would come if they did not turn back to God. The small children are faint from hunger, women are eating their young, and the youth have fallen by the vicious sword of the enemy. To “lament” means to “cry aloud,” and this is exactly what Jeremiah is doing throughout the book—crying out to God in the midst of severe pain.

In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah describes to God the depth of his hurt and the condition of his soul. Jeremiah is walking in darkness, his skin wasting away, his bones broken; he is besieged with bitterness and hardship. His chains are heavy, and even his prayers seem to fall on deaf ears. He feels as if the Lord is a lion that has torn him to pieces, an archer who has impaled his heart with fierce arrows. Consider the words of his lamentation:

“He [the Lord] has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drunk with wormwood. He has broken my teeth with gravel; He has made me cower in the dust. My soul has been rejected from peace; I have forgotten happiness. So I say, ‘My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the LORD.’ Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me.”

Lamentations 3:15–20

Jeremiah’s suffering is so severe that he has lost all hope; his “soul ... is bowed down” under the heavy weight of his thoughts. But then, in Lamentations 3:21, Jeremiah makes a deliberate decision to turn his thoughts from dwelling on the suffering surrounding him. He decides to remember, instead, the faithfulness of God. This results in an immediate change—not in the circumstances of Jeremiah’s life, but in the condition of his soul. He continues to lament, but his lamentations are ones of hope and assurance:

*“This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; **great is Your faithfulness.** ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.”*

Lamentations 3:21–25

What an incredible difference the faithfulness of God makes in our life! But we must learn to take note of His faithfulness, and remember it when we feel like lamenting our current situation. Everything we know of God from the past should cause us to hope in Him for the present and for the future. Hope is a Person—the Person of Jesus Christ—and He is the same “*yesterday and today ... and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8). His faithfulness is as sure as the dawning of the day. His mercy, comfort, and love are renewed to us with every sunrise. The record of His faithfulness should be stored in the memory of our heart and pulled out as a mental scrapbook to give hope in times of trial.

Let’s see what this principle looks like in the life of a young woman named Mary:

We all know the beautiful story of the birth of Jesus Christ. God honored a young Jewish woman with the ministry of giving birth to the long-promised Messiah. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Mary in Luke 1, he repeatedly assured her of the working of God in her life to give her the grace necessary to willfully surrender to this mission. The angel says, “*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you*” (Luke 1:28). Mary expresses the confusion in her heart, and the angel replies, “*Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God*” (Luke 1:30).

When she once again questions the miracle that is about to happen to her, the angel says, “*Nothing will be impossible with God*” (Luke 1:37). After this conversation, there is no doubt left in Mary’s heart. She willingly responds to this call to

ministry with this statement of surrender, “*Behold the bonds slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38). Mary was all in!

Along with the privilege of giving birth to the Son of God, there would be a certain amount of shame from misunderstanding people who would question the validity of the virgin birth. But far beyond the shame would be the certain pain of raising your firstborn son to be crucified for the sins of the world. Mary was being called into ministry, and ministry involves sacrifice and suffering.

Mary was a student of God’s Word and an observer of God’s faithfulness. In her song of exaltation to God (Luke 1:46–55), she repeatedly expresses the mighty things God has done on behalf of His people. She recalls the history of His faithfulness to herself and to the nation of Israel. No doubt, like Jeremiah, she is pondering the working of God in the past, and it is giving her strength for the future.

Aristotle said, “*Memory is the scribe of the soul.*” From this point forward, Mary begins to keep a soul-diary of the faithfulness of God in her life. In Luke 2, the shepherds came to worship the newborn Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem. They made known to Mary and Joseph the statement which the angels had told them about the Child; “... *today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:11). “*All who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart*” (Luke 2:18–19).

There are two very important words in this verse. The first is the word “*treasured up,*” which is *suntereo* in the Greek. *Suntereo* means “to keep closely together” and, by implication, “to guard, to keep the eye upon, to keep from escaping.” The other word of importance is the word “*pondering.*” It is *sumballo* in the Greek and means “to consider” and, by application, “to personally aid.”

This verse tells us so much about where Mary was spiritually—and where we should be spiritually. She was paying attention!

If we don't pay attention to the faithfulness of God in our lives, then we have no way to build up the memories we need of His faithfulness. Mary is not only paying attention, but the verse indicates she is building a "treasure chest" of memories in her heart, writing a diary of God's faithfulness for future reference. Later in the chapter, Simeon tells Mary and Joseph that the Child "*is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—and a sword will pierce even your own soul ...*" (Luke 2:34–35). If you knew a sword would soon pierce your soul, it would be wise to prepare your soul for that piercing. This is just what Mary did.

At the end of Luke 2, we have the story of when Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem to study in the temple. When His mother finally found Him there, she asked why He had caused them so much worry by not accompanying the family on the trip home. Jesus said, "*Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?*" (Luke 2:49). Jesus was verbally declaring His commitment to the will of the Father for His life. Once again, "*His mother treasured all these things in her heart*" (Luke 2:51). Mary had established a spiritual habit of "treasuring up" the manifestations of God in her life so she could properly understand His plan and have hope in times of trial.

When the inevitable time came for the Lord Jesus Christ to be nailed to a cross for the sins of the world, Mary was there. John 19:25 tells us that at the time of the crucifixion, His mother "stood" by the cross. The word "stood" is the Greek word *histemi*, meaning "to stand firm, to stand erect." The crowd mocked, the disciples ran, the priests jeered, the soldiers cast their lots—but Mary stood!

This was the very time that Simeon had told her would come. This was the piercing of the sword into her motherly heart. Mary was prepared to stand in this time of trial because she had built a

treasure chest in her heart of God's faithfulness. We know from Acts 1:14 that Mary continued on in the faith to the end of her life. When the newborn Church gathered together with one mind in prayer, Mary was there!

The day before my husband and I were moving back to America from Australia, I was walking along the ocean cliffs of Sydney with my daughter-in-law, Kristy. She was recently married to my son, Wil, and was all-aglow with love and admiration for her new husband. We were lost in beautiful conversation with each other about life as a Christian woman and wife. As we were walking along, we noticed a full rainbow forming across the Pacific Ocean. I said to Kristy, *"that is the very direction we will be flying out for America tomorrow,"* and I took encouragement from its promise because our move back to America was full of unknowns. As we were marveling at its beauty, a second full rainbow formed—just as radiant and colorful as the first! I said, *"Kristy, there is one for each of us!"*

There were many people on the cliffs and beaches of Sydney who saw those rainbows that day, but I am quite certain they were created and delivered from the hand of God just for Kristy and me! God deals with us in a very individual and determined manner. He knows the plans He has for each of us, and He knows that those plans will, at some point, involve suffering, trials, tests, and pain. Because God is faithful, He faithfully prepares us for such times. But like Mary, we must pay attention and build a reservoir in our soul of God's Word and God's faithfulness.

So, what's in the treasure chest of your soul? Do you take note of prayers that God has answered? Blessings He has given? Needs He has filled? Do you remember promises He has kept and problems He has solved? I hope you do because these memories will help strengthen you in the times of trial that may be ahead in your life.

We may very soon find ourselves in a situation like Jeremiah—one of personal and national disaster. Even apart from that

happening, we do not get through life without a sword piercing our soul from time to time. When those times come, remember the faithfulness of God to you in the past, and let it give you stability in the present and hope for the future!

I'm pretty certain the sun will rise tomorrow morning; and when it does, we will receive a brand new portion of God's love, mercy, and faithfulness. What a treasure!

Lesson Nineteen: Fear of the Lord

“Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.”

Proverbs 31:30



Verse 30 starts with the Hebrew letter *shin*. *Shin* pictures a **tooth** and speaks of a **feast**.

*The woman of honor has a healthy respect
for her Lord and His Word*

I have always been amazed at the number of stunningly beautiful women there are in this world. At times, we will be in some desolate area, in a poor remote village, and in will walk a woman who could easily outshine a Hollywood star in her raw, natural beauty. She will live out her life without lotions, cosmetics, or fine clothes, sleeping on the floor of some bamboo or mud hut, but the beauty given to her by the hand of God is undeniable. Our Creator God is such an artist and sculptor and, at times, His greatest work is found in the face and form of a woman.

The picture above was taken during a Bible class in a spiritually restricted area of Asia. This woman is not stunningly beautiful by human terms. Her skin is leathery and lined, her hair thinning and gray—yet, as Gene was teaching, the countenance of her face lit up with the delight of feasting on God’s Word. I couldn’t help but try to capture her beauty with my Canon. I love the way the inner beauty of a woman’s soul surfaces in her eyes, countenance, and smile!

A daily diet of God’s Word is the nourishment we need to develop inner beauty and protect us from the deceptions of the world. David said:

“One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to meditate in His temple.”

Psalm 27:4

David’s innermost desire was to behold the beauty of the Lord in the Word of God. This should be our desire as well. Yet, at times, our female vanity causes us to be more caught up with our own beauty than the beauty of the Lord, more drawn to looking at our own reflection in the mirror than looking into the mirror of God’s Word.

In the days of Isaiah, the nation of Israel was going through a time of great discipline from the Lord *“because their speech and their actions are against the LORD, to rebel against His glorious presence”* (Isaiah 3:8). The Lord passes judgment on Israel’s leaders and its people. The women are not excluded from this divine judgment because of the extreme vanity of their life. Read the words Isaiah uses to describe their haughtiness, and consider how closely it resembles many women in Western culture today:

“Moreover, the LORD said, ‘Because the daughters of Zion are proud, and walk with heads held high and seductive eyes, and go along with mincing steps, and tinkle the bangles on their feet, therefore the Lord will afflict the scalp of the daughters of Zion with scabs, and the LORD will make their foreheads bare.’ In that day the Lord will take away the beauty of their anklets, headbands, crescent ornaments, dangling earrings, bracelets, veils, headdresses, ankle chains, sashes, perfume boxes, amulets, finger rings, nose rings, festal robes, outer tunics, cloaks, money purses, hand mirrors, undergarments, turbans and veils. Now it will come about that instead of sweet perfume there will be putrefaction; instead of a belt, a rope;

*instead of well-set hair, a plucked-out scalp;
instead of fine clothes, donning of sackcloth; and
branding instead of beauty.”* Isaiah 3:16–24

This is a very descriptive passage of Scripture. Visualize with me the “before and after” portrait of these women. One day, they are walking around “dolled up” to the max and so proud of how sexy and attractive they are, so caught up in possessing every article available to enhance their vanity. Their closets, drawers, and jewelry boxes are full—and they love it! This is the portrait of the proud and haughty female.

The next day, judgment arrives from the hand of God. Their hair is plucked away and their scalp becomes scabbed, their clothing is stripped from them and all that remains is rope and sackcloth, the aroma of their sweet perfume is replaced with a putrefying stench, and there is nothing they can do to escape it. When God’s judgment comes, there is no place to hide. This is the portrait of a woman branded for discipline.

This Isaiah passage is a very extreme account of discipline from the Lord. We may not suffer a “*plucked out scalp*” and a branded hide; but if we rebel against His glorious presence in our life, we will suffer His just discipline. Therefore, these verses should stand as a warning to us as well: a warning of the danger of getting so caught up in the physical that we forget the spiritual, a warning against the deceitfulness of charm and the vain nature of physical beauty and a warning not to worship self but the One true and living God of the Bible. We must filter the lures of this world and the deception of commercialism through the eyes of God’s Word.

I recently had a three-hour layover in the Las Vegas airport. My soul mourned the absolute vanity of all that surrounded me, and the complete and utter absence of any mention of God. There should be a place in our life to physically adorn ourselves, to care for the temple that houses our eternal soul, and to beautify ourselves for the pleasure of our husbands, but that place should

not take priority over the need to care for our soul. I think God wants us to celebrate our femininity. But if it consumes our time, attention, and finances, this celebration turns to idolatry.

Today's world is infected with the disease of deception. It started in the Garden, and it has spread through the hearts and souls of men and women ever since. Paul wrote about this in 2 Corinthians when he implored the Corinthian believers to be single-minded and pure in their relationship with Christ:

“For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”

2 Corinthians 11:2–3

One of the deceptions we, as women, are most susceptible to is the deception of charm and beauty. We like the attention and adoration of men, but if we lust after that in an inordinate way, or desire to receive it from an improper source, we have been deceived by its power and led away from pure *“devotion to Christ.”* The greater desire should be to receive the praise and adoration of Jesus Christ Himself, and this is available to us through the fear of the Lord.

What does it mean to fear the Lord? Fear is defined as “an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is likely to cause a danger or threat to us.” Synonyms of fear are terror, fright, horror, alarm, and dread. But in the biblical sense, fear is based on a reverential awe of Who and what God is (Psalm 33:8), coupled with a healthy understanding of His holy standard of righteousness and justice. It is a deep, inner desire to do what is right in God's sight out of love and gratitude for His grace to us.

We see this explained for us in Hebrews 12:28–29 when the writer says, “... *let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.*” As a well-trained child looks with love and admiration to the wisdom and strength of his father, yet fears the consequences of violating his father’s standards, so we should look with love and admiration to the wisdom and strength of our heavenly Father and desire to live within the standards of His household—or suffer the just consequences. Our fear of the Lord beckons us to worship Him, to serve Him, and to obey Him as our heavenly Father.

Have you ever been tempted to take something or do something that you knew was wrong, and everything inside of you wanted to follow through with that temptation? Of course you have! You are human, just like I am. With the temptation comes the thought “what if someone finds out” or “what will the consequences be?” You knew if you could only get away with doing that thing and nobody would know (including God), then you would follow through with the sin. But then, the still, small voice inside of you says, “there will be consequences because God **will** know.” This is the fear of the Lord piercing our heart and delivering us from sin and evil. We turn from the temptation out of admiration and duty to our heavenly Father, who we love—and fear!

There are many examples in Scripture of believers who acted according to God’s will because the fear of the Lord lived in their heart. Two women who are praised in Scripture for their fear of the Lord are Shiphrah and Puah, ladies who became heroines in the story of Israel’s deliverance because of their wisdom and bravery. As Christians, we love to name our daughters after our forerunners in the faith, so you probably all know a girl in your church named Shiphrah or Puah, right? Ha! These women were Jewish midwives living in captivity in Egypt. The Pharaoh feared the rise of the Jewish people and so commanded the midwives thus, “when you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birth stool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live. But the

midwives **feared God**, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live” (Exodus 1:16–17).

These women were being commanded by the highest authority in the land of Egypt to murder babies. Shiphrah and Puah’s fear of the Lord kept them from committing repeated acts of murder against the Jewish newborns (oh, that such fear could be found in America today!). Their fear of the Lord led them disregard their own safety in order to give due regard to God’s creation and His holy Word.

When the king of Egypt realized that the baby boys were not being put to death, he called upon the midwives to give an explanation, and they replied, “*the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them*” (Exodus 1:19). God honors faith, and He honors our fear of disobeying Him.

In light of the midwives’ actions, consider these verses on the fear of the Lord:

- The fear of the Lord gives wisdom:
Psalm 111:10; Job 28:28; Proverbs 9:10
- The fear of the Lord leads to life:
Proverbs 19:23
- The fear of the Lord is to hate and avoid evil:
Proverbs 8:13; 16:6
- The fear of the Lord will keep you from sinning:
Exodus 20:20
- The fear of the Lord gives security and confidence:
Proverbs 15:16; Job 4:6

The truth of these verses is found in the actions of the midwives. In a difficult time of trial, they demonstrated wisdom and confidence to do the right thing in God’s eyes, turning from the path of sin and evil and following the path that led to the preserving of precious life. There was danger involved in their

decision, for to purposely go against the commands of Pharaoh could certainly lead to violent consequences. God not only protected the midwives, but He blessed them as well. The passage goes on to say, “so God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very mighty. **Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them**” (Exodus 11:20–21).

In light of God’s honor and goodness to Shiphrah and Puah, consider these promises regarding the fear of the Lord:

- “*A woman who fears the LORD*” is to “*be praised.*”
Proverbs 31:30
- “*The LORD*” takes pleasure in all “*who fear Him.*”
Psalm 147:11
- “*The LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.*”
Psalm 103:13
- The Lord “*will bless those who fear Him.*”
Psalm 115:13
- He stores up goodness “*for those who fear*” Him.
Psalm 31:19
- He “*fulfill[s] the desire of those who fear Him.*”
Psalm 145:19
- “*The secret of the LORD is for those who fear Him.*”
Psalm 25:14
- “*His mercy is*” on “*those who fear Him.*”
Luke 1:50
- “*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him.*”
Psalm 34:7
- “*In the fear of the LORD there is ... refuge*” and rescue from the “*snares of death.*”
Proverbs 14:26–27

The truth of these verses is found in the protection and blessing that God faithfully bestowed on the midwives. And these promises are for us as well when we live in the fear of the Lord.

Since “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge [wisdom]*” (Proverbs 1:7) and the woman of honor manifests God’s wisdom in her life, it is fitting that this beautiful section of Proverbs should conclude with the promise of praise for all who fear the Lord.

Many years ago, an artistic friend of mine gave me a piece of prose written on a beautiful picture, and I would like to share that prose with you in closing. It was written by Ann Kiemel and is the prayer of a woman who understands that “*charm is deceitful and beauty if vain, but a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.*”

“Jesus, I am a humble lowly servant woman. Take me, all of me. Add anything, take away anything, at any cost, at any price. Make me Yours completely ... wholly. May I not be remembered for how I wear my hair, or the shape of my face, or the crowds I have addressed. May I be known for loving You, for carrying a dream, for building bridges to the hurt and broken and lost in the world. Make me what You would be if You lived in the person where I do. May everything accomplished through my simple life bring honor and glory to You. Take my human failures and flaws and use them to remind those who know me that only You are God, and I will always just be ... (fill in your name).”

Amen!

Lesson Twenty: Eternal Fruit

“Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.”

Proverbs 31:31



Verse 31 starts with the Hebrew letter *tav*. *Tav* pictures a **signature** and speaks of **identification**.

*The woman of honor is praised
for her spiritual fruit.*

Graffiti reveals a lot about the human race. It is a small reminder that we all want to be remembered in this life. We want to think we left a mark on the world even if it is only a carving on a tree, an etching on a stone, or a name spray-painted on a bathroom stall. We want people to know that we were here, we lived, we breathed, we existed.

This last verse of Proverbs 31 ends with the *tav* file, which speaks of a signature and represents our identity in this world. As women of God, we have a much greater and more lasting mark to strive for than the mere graffiti of our name on some temporal structure. Our character and service in this life is the signature that identifies us as a woman of faith in both time and eternity.

As mentioned before in Proverbs 31:29–31, the book of Proverbs is being wrapped up with the praise that is promised to a woman of honor. In Proverbs 31:29, she is praised by her children and husband; in Proverbs 31:30, she is praised by God for her fear of the Lord; and in this very last verse, we find that she is also praised *“in the gates”* because of the work *“of her hands.”* I find it fitting that the chapter closes with these promises of praise because we all appreciate a little reward at the end of a long effort. At the end of the workweek, we want a paycheck; at the

end of dinner, we want a “thank you”; and at the end of the day, we want a good-night kiss. Above all, at the end of our days on this earth, we want to know our life has eternal value in God’s sight. The words of Jesus apply here- he said to His disciples, “*If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him,*” John 12:26.

Proverbs 31:31 stands as a promise to the virtuous woman that the works of her hands—representing her service in life—will come back to praise her among her family, her people, and her God. Remember, in Proverbs 31:23, her husband is known “*in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.*” We talked about how the support a wife gives to her husband helps enable him to be a man of honor and respect so that he is known “*in the gates.*” In the same way, the service of the woman is recognized “*in the gates*” where the leaders sit to judge and where the people gather for conversation and commerce.

Let’s talk about the “*product of her hands.*” If you use your hands to piece and stitch a quilt, that quilt is the product of your hands. If you use your hands to till the soil, plant seeds, water and weed, that garden becomes the product of your hands. If you use your life to serve Jesus Christ by serving your husband, your family, and your church, that fruit becomes the work of your hands. “Fruit” is used in the Bible as a picture of divine production in our life, a picture of what God does through us to give glory to Himself. He is worthy! As our friend, Pastor Doug Wray, says, “*God does not just want a field free from weeds, He wants a field full of fruit.*” Let’s consider four principles regarding “fruit-bearing” in our life:

- 1. The bearing of fruit is a result of our walk with the Lord.**

In Colossians 1, Paul prays for the Colossian believers to:

“... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work ...”
Colossians 1:9–10

Paul desires that his brothers and sisters in Christ:

- be filled with wisdom,
- have a faithful walk, and
- have fruitful work.

Paul’s prayer really captures the heartbeat of Proverbs 31 as we have seen the virtuous woman to be a lady of wisdom, and that wisdom is played out in her relationship to God in her life, service, and ministry. Notice that the wisdom and the walk precede the fruit! We cannot have a truly fruitful life without first being filled with God’s wisdom and walking faithfully before Him.

2. We bear fruit according to the way we sow.

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

Galatians 6:7–8

This is an illustration based on an agricultural truth of life. If you plant watermelon seeds, you grow watermelon; if you plant corn seeds, you grow corn. That’s just the way it is and you can’t change it! In this passage, there is a promise of eternal reward for fruit-bearing, but there is also a red flag thrown up for us: you can’t fool God! If we are sowing bad seed, there will be bad fruit; if we are living for self, we will bear the consequences of a self-lived life. These are corrupt consequences. That’s the way

it is and you can't change it! You own what you sow. God gives you the "*product of your hands.*" If we are living for the holy and righteous God, there is good and eternal fruit from our labors.

3. Fruit-bearing takes time.

In the same Galatians passage, Paul goes on to say, "*Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary,*" Galatians 6:9.

This passage teaches us that fruit-bearing does take time. Farmers plant in the springtime, water, weed, and feed throughout the summer, but do not receive the harvest until the fall. So it is with our life. The seeds we plant in our youth are the establishing of marriage, raising of children, investing in home and career, and the dedication to using our spiritual gifts in service to God. We often do not see the real fruit of those labors (whether for self or God) until years down the road.

This is really important for young people to understand. You are planting seeds in your youth that will bear fruit in old age. If there is forgiveness in marriage, that forgiveness will build strength, which will benefit you in years to come. If there is diligence in raising your children to the glory of God, that diligence will bring blessing to your children and to yourself, but you may not see it for many years.

It may seem that there is not time in your busy life to be regular in church attendance, in prayer, or in Bible study; but if you neglect these important factors in your youth, there will be consequences in old age.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing! If you do this, there will be fruitful consequences for you and your family. Look at the older people around you.

They wear the consequences of life's attitudes (whether good or bad) on their faces. They carry the burden or joy of life's decisions (whether good or bad) in their hearts. That's the way it is and you can't change it. Today is an investment in tomorrow and an investment in eternity!

In Psalm 92, the psalmist says:

“The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green, to declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.”

Psalm 92:12–15

This is a beautiful passage in the Psalms that reiterates the principle that fruit-bearing takes time.

When a palm tree flourishes with fruit, there is great happiness in the harvest, but it takes nearly ten years for this to happen. In between the planting and the harvest, there is a consistent investment of time in watering and tending that tree to nurture it to maturity.

The cedars of Lebanon were prized above all other trees. They grew straight and strong, and were wonderfully scented. But they did not sprout up overnight; it took time and care for them to mature. The righteous man (and woman) will flourish and stand in the same way as these valuable trees, and bear fruit—even in old age—to declare the upright and righteous nature of God. Fruit-bearing is to be a lifelong endeavor!

4. Our boasting is in God, and God alone.

In 1 Corinthians 1:25–28, God gives hope to every person in the family of God. He says that God calls and uses the foolish, the weak, the insignificant, and the despised to display the power and wisdom of God to the world, “*that no [one] should boast before God.*”

In 2 Corinthians 3:5, Paul goes on to say “*Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.*” The only thing we have to offer God is our availability. He is faithful and gracious to take that attitude of availability and perform a work in and through us.

In Romans 15:18, Paul—the greatest of all the apostles—speaks from a humble heart when he says, “*For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me ...*” Therefore, when spiritual fruit is produced in our lives, we are to boast in God and God alone!

What if we were to fulfill every bit of instruction in Scripture, dedicate every moment of our life in service to God, and have every form of virtue a woman is encouraged to display? If we were to do all of those things, then we could only say—like the slaves in Luke 17:10—“*We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.*”

This principle leads me to reflect on the grace of God. As we have seen, the Lord is the One who imparts His wisdom and strength to us. His love motivates us, and His Spirit enables us to serve Him through serving others. All these things come from Him and yet He praises, blesses, honors, and rewards His unworthy slaves!

One of the verses that has really impacted my soul recently is Ephesians 1:7–8a. I may have mentioned it earlier in the book but if so, it is worth mentioning again:

*“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He **lavished** upon us.”*

The word that has been grabbing my attention, like booming fireworks in the sky, is the word “lavish.” It is the Greek word *perisseuo* and means “to be in excess, to super abound, to have and to have more.”

When we think of the word “lavish” in our life, we think of something that is so extravagant and over-the-top that it sets us spinning with delight. If we think of the word lavish in physical terms, it is like having not just a bowl of fresh, ripe straw-berries, but strawberries with whipped cream on top. It is the thought of not just a massage, but a massage with warm oil, soft music, and candles. Or your husband not just walking in the door and saying “Honey, I’m home,” but having him walk in the door with roses and chocolates, look you in the eye and say “I love you to the moon and back”—after which he sweeps you off your feet and brings you down the hall to paradise! You get my point!

But spiritually, it is so much more than these little earthly things. These are the spiritual riches that God pours out on us, and pours out more, and then pours out even more! For, in Him, we have been blessed “*with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,*” Ephesians 1:3. His grace is so extravagant and over-the-top that it should keep us spinning with delight!

I was talking about this lavish grace with the ladies who help me with Children’s Ministry in India. As we were driving through the chaotic streets, we started considering examples of the lavish grace of God in Scripture and how it was displayed in the lives of our forerunners in the faith. We thought of many stories in the Bible where God went above and beyond what was even

necessary to show the abundance of His grace to His children. Consider these occasions:

1. When Moses and the children of Israel came to the Red Sea, God parted the waters—that's God's grace. God not only parted the waters, but He went above and beyond by letting them cross the Red Sea on dry land (Exodus 14:16). They didn't even get their feet wet—that's His **lavish** grace!
2. God opened the womb of Sarah in her old age to bless her and Abraham with a long-awaited son—that's God's grace. God went above and beyond by assuring them, "... *I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore ...*" (Genesis 22:17)—that's His **lavish** grace!
3. Ruth suffered the loss of her husband as a young woman. As she sought to serve her mother-in-law Naomi by gleaning in the fields, God provided Ruth with a new husband Boaz and blessed them both with a son—that's God's grace. Not only did God give them a son, He went above and beyond to give them a son,—Obed, who is in the lineage of Jesus Christ (Ruth 4:13–22; Matthew 1:1–16)—that's His **lavish** grace!
4. Naaman took the advice of his little servant girl and went to the prophet Elijah to be healed of his leprosy, and he was healed—that's God's grace. Not only was he healed of leprosy, but God did above and beyond and restored Naaman's flesh "*like the flesh of a little child*" (2 Kings 5:14)—that's His **lavish** grace!
5. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound and thrown into a furnace of blazing fire for not bowing to a heathen idol, Jesus Christ loosed their bonds and walked with them in the furnace (Daniel 3:25)—that's God's grace. They not only survived the extreme flames of the fiery furnace, but God went above and beyond for

them. “*The smell of fire [had not] even come upon them,*” and not one “*hair of their head had been singed*” (Daniel 3:27)—that’s His **lavish** grace!

6. There once was a little boy who shared his lunch with Jesus. God took the five loaves and two fishes and multiplied them to feed thousands of hungry people—that’s God’s grace. Jesus went above and beyond and did so much multiplying of that little lunch that there were baskets of food left over for His disciples (John 6:1–14)—that’s His **lavish** grace!

For those who believe in Jesus Christ, the lavish grace of God begins with our birth into the Royal Family of God (1 Peter 2:9) and all the spiritual blessings that accompany regeneration. Not only does God forgive our many sins by His grace, but in His lavish grace, He forgives them for all time, He separates them as far from us as the east is from the west, and He remembers them no more (see Psalm 103:10–12).

By God’s grace, we have the full Canon of Scripture: His commands, His prophecies, His historical accounts, and more. In God’s lavish grace, He includes for us so many expressions of His love and so many promises that secure our hope and trust in Him, comfort our soul, and bring us to rest.

Although all our sins were forgiven on the cross, as human beings, we continue to sin. When we confess our sins, in time, “*He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins*”—this is God’s grace. But He goes above and beyond forgiving the sins we confess, for in His lavish grace, “[He] *cleanse[s] us from all unrighteousness*”—that is the cleansing of sins we know and admit, and the ones that we are not even aware of (1 John 1:9).

Regarding God’s grace, we haven’t seen anything yet, compared to what we will see in Heaven! In eternity, He will continue to reveal to us “*the surpassing riches of His grace*” (Ephesians 2:7), a forever-unveiling of His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus! What grace it is to have a forever-home, with mansions waiting

for us, with streets of gold to walk upon, with angelic choruses praising our Lord, and with new glorious bodies to dwell in. We can't even imagine! But on top of all this grace is the lavish grace of God to invite us to meet our Savior face-to-face and forever be in His loving Presence!

I would encourage you to look at Scripture with new eyes—eyes that look for God's grace, and look again for God's lavish grace! It's like a treasure waiting to be discovered in the pages of Scripture and in the story of our lives. Praise, blessing, honor, and reward stand out in my mind as some of the **most lavish** of all God's lavish graces shown to man.

Our Lord is the One who saves us, leads us, teaches us, empowers us, helps us, and compels us, for apart from Him we can do nothing—this is God's grace. But He goes above and beyond by sharing His praise, blessing, and reward with little old you and little old me—this is His lavish grace! It is by God's grace that we are given the spiritual resources to become virtuous women; it is by His **lavish** grace that He rewards us for what He has done in and through us. What a lavish and loving God we serve!

In Luke 11, Jesus was imparting wisdom and truth to the people surrounding Him. As He was doing this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice, and said to Him, "*Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed*" (Luke 11:27). Of course, the woman was speaking of Mary, whom we consider to be the most blessed woman of all time because of the privilege God gave her to be the earthly mother of Jesus Christ. However, Jesus responded to the woman with these words, "*On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it*" (Luke 11:28).

Imagine the privilege of being more blessed than Mary! According to Jesus Christ Himself, the greatest blessing we can receive in life is to be transformed by the hearing and obeying of God's Word. Throughout the study of Proverbs 31, we have been challenged and rebuked, encouraged and motivated. But,

hopefully, we have also been transformed by the truths of the Bible. If you have persevered with this study, I can only conclude that you desire to be a woman of honor. I join with you in that desire, knowing that it is a constant goal to strive for—not a prize already won.

I have been a believer for over forty years now, and still I fail to measure up in so many ways and at so many times—but I continue to press on.

It is my prayer that we press on together to know, serve, and love the One who died for us, is risen, and is seated at the right hand of God.

He is coming quickly to take His Bride home to Him!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation 22:20

