

Lifecraft from God – Working Well

Every Friday night, in many Jewish homes across the world, just before the Shabbat meal, the man of the house will sing [this song](#) about the woman of valour.

So today we are looking at the words of that song in Proverbs 31: The woman of valour

It's a song or poem named after its first words which in Hebrew are Eshet Chayil – sometimes translated the wife of noble character, the woman of worth or virtuous woman. Chayil is used several places in the Hebrew scriptures, and means to be firm, it's about strength and it's used for mighty warriors in the army: the best translation of Eshet Chayil seems to be woman of valour

You see in Jewish culture that phrase is used a bit like a high-five when a woman has done something splendid.

- Got a promotion or passed your driving test (like my daughter S)? Eshet chayil! Go girl
- Or like C in housegroup who has done the coast to coast cycle ride ? Eshet Chayil – woman of strength
- K took her business to the national CIPD exhibition? Eshet Chayil - Capable businesswoman
- B was shortlisted for a national bloggers award. Eshet Chayil – woman of excellent reputation
- P and the others pray for healing on the streets – Eshet Chayil – courageous women
- J got a standing ovation for a fabulous Starlight Express production on roller skates – Eshet Chayil – vigorous woman
- We've heard stories here from people who have got themselves debt-free – Eshet Chayil – financially strong again
- Some of you care for an elderly relative with dementia? Eshet Chayil - woman of noble character
- Some of you are remaining positive under the threat of job cuts. Eshet Chayil – we salute your strength of character

Do you see how honouring this phrase is to women?

And there's more to it than a friendly celebration. This phrase is the beginning of a rather special poem in the Bible, Proverbs, chapter 31, and you have it on your handout.

Specially constructed

I wonder do you read poems? If you are like me, possibly not very often, but I bet you listen to sung poems more than you realise. Songs. Sometimes poems and songs seem like a spattering of random ideas in sentences that don't make sense – maybe just to get

it to rhyme and strange phrases to fit the rhythm or something. It can sometimes help make it seem slightly less random if we understand the way a particular poem or song has been constructed.

Today's poem is actually an acrostic.

An acrostic poem
Can be about anything
Really.
Of course, some people like to
Start each line as a sentence
Though
I prefer weaving words into a
Creation that is more freeform

This poem starts with Alef, and each line goes through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order. You wouldn't guess that from our English translation, but you can see it in the coloured boxes on your handout alongside each verse. Now if we did that in English your big problems are the lines beginning J, Q, X and Z, your poem is going to be about Jam, Queen, Zip and Xylophone. I find it amazing that this Hebrew poem makes any kind of sense given the constraints of those starting letters. So don't worry too much about strange words like Distaff which get thrown in here and there. It's a poem!

Chiasm

Also on your handout you will see some green lines which reveal the structure of the poem. It's called chiasm or mirroring. So the first bit about the value of the woman is echoed by the last bit about praising her value. The second bit is mirrored, if you follow the green line, by the second to last bit. Surrounding the middle you see some sections about clothing. And then in 21a "When it snows she has no fear for her household" is echoed in 25b by "she can laugh at the days to come". Both of the sections are about planning for the future. If you hadn't spotted the structure, you'd think those ideas were just randomly dotted throughout the poem. The echoes are reminding you, reinforcing, building on what's already been said. By the way, it isn't perfect chiasm – that's tricky with Js, Xs and Qs (or the equivalent).

Layers of meaning

So what does the poem mean? Why does a Jewish man sing this song at the beginning of the Sabbath every week, just before he blesses the children? It's partly to affirm and celebrate his wife, and a radical understanding of her role at the heart of business and economic leadership – that's the natural meaning. Normally we should spend lots of our time on the primary meaning, and there is much to say about this radical view of women. You might want to do that in housegroup. Today I want to show you some

other layers of meaning that people have found in this poem. You'll have to puzzle out whether they are all valid. You might think some of this is rubbish and stick to the literal first layer of meaning – but I challenge you to look deeper as well. This passage is not a sermon or a story, it's a poem, and poems work in a different way.

Some Jews also understand that the day of rest is deeply related to the concept of the feminine. So you can read bits of this poem as celebrating the Sabbath. And others use it to remember Shekinah, the feminine word for the glory of God – which we Christians might perhaps understand to be the Holy Spirit.

Wisdom

The biggest double entendre in this poem is very clever. The book of proverbs starts in chapter 1 with the lady wisdom calling aloud in the market square. The whole of Chapter 8 personifies wisdom as a woman with trustworthy things to say. In Chapter 9 this female representation of wisdom builds a house – a bit like Jesus's story of the wise man building a house on a rock. And in chapter 31 we have this poem about a woman of valour. Could it be that the woman of valour is in fact the lady wisdom, when you consider the book of Proverbs as a whole?

Looking at the first few verses, let's substitute some words

- Wisdom is worth more than rubies
- We can have full confidence in wisdom
- Wisdom brings you good not harm all the days of your life

Are you starting to see how this poem works as you spot another layer of meaning? If you want more on wisdom, Sally's talk on Proverbs from a couple of weeks ago is available online.

I think God will speak to you as you wrestle with the text, and explore the different layers of meaning. You may just have one of those Aha! moments. So let us pray...

The worker

In Star Jumps a few weeks ago, with the children aged 6 and 7, we did the story of the man let down through the roof by his friends to see Jesus who forgave him and then healed him. So the kids acted it out. Then we said, let's do it again, but change one thing to see what happens. They suggested the changes and then acted it out working out what might have happened based on what they know of Jesus.

- So we did a version where they accidentally dropped the man through the roof and he died? What would Jesus have done?
- There was a version where he just forgave him and didn't bother healing him.
- And they had a couple more versions

Changing the Bible story may sound odd, but experimenting with changes can help us see what the original version is actually saying and why. It was lots of fun, and I think the kids' discussion about the character of Jesus and what he would have done was some of the best theology I've seen in that group.

We did a similar experiment in our housegroup a few weeks ago, with today's poem. We were asking ourselves "What would the poem be like if we emphasised the layer of meaning about work?" What would that mean in today's world of work, all sorts of work, home, studying or employed, whether it was a man or a woman. What does it mean to follow Jesus in the world of work? I've asked B to read an official version of the poem and alongside that I'll read our housegroup's unofficial hacked 'translation' into the world of work. You have the original version on your sheets of course.

This reminds me of a time last August in Africa when our team were worshipping in a local Maasai church in Kenya. I did the reading in English, and after each phrase Pastor Ben translated it into Swahili. Pastor Ben was so vivacious and dramatic in his translation that gradually I became more and more expressive in my reading too. My children thought this was very funny. So let's see what happens with the reading today.

Original (NIV) - reader 1	Work version - David
¹⁰ A woman of valour who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.	¹⁰ A noble worker who can find? They are worth far more than diamonds .
¹¹ Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.	¹¹ The rest of the family have full confidence in them , they are trusted to make decisions and they aren't skint .
¹² She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.	¹² They bring good, not harm, through their work all the days of their life, not just until their official retirement age .
¹³ She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.	¹³ They select good quality materials and have an eager and willing attitude to work
¹⁴ She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.	¹⁴ They bring together resources from all the best places
¹⁵ She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants.	¹⁵ They work hard provide for their family and share the profits with their co-workers
¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.	¹⁶ They make investments and have a plan to be productive
¹⁷ She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.	¹⁷ They don't get stuck unproductively reading endless emails and they make sure they are well-trained and keep fit
¹⁸ She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.	¹⁸ They manage their business and household finances which is what keeps the lights on .
¹⁹ In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.	¹⁹ Xylophones, zips, jam and queen music are some of the things that they might sell on ebay. (nb humour)
²⁰ She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.	²⁰ They connect their work with the social needs of the world – materials are fairly traded, the business is

	carbon-neutral and non-polluting, they have a Give as you Earn scheme and unsold food goes to the homeless.
^{21a} When it snows, she has no fear for her household; ^{21b} for all of them are clothed in scarlet.	^{21a} They have a plan for the bad times even in recession their utility bills are not inked in scarlet. They are not afraid of the future
²² She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.	²² They construct IKEA furniture, that's work And it was work to create all the handmade things around the house
²³ Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.	²³ It's work to lobby the city council. The chamber of commerce, the school board of governors, the charity activist: it's all work and demands our respect
²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.	²⁴ It's all work, whether you are in retail, wholesale, studying, caring, homemaking, labouring, managing or doing admin. Or selling scarves.
^{25a} She is clothed with strength and dignity;	^{25a} Whatever your work is, paid or unpaid, stand up and be proud of it, you are not "just a" something
^{25b} she can laugh at the days to come.	^{25b} Planning ahead takes effort, but it gives you a light and bubbly spirit
²⁶ She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.	²⁶ Pass on what you know. Teaching isn't just for teachers.
²⁷ She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.	²⁷ Workers often have to juggle caring responsibilities the sandwich generation hasn't time to eat the bread of idleness
²⁸ Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ²⁹ 'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.'	²⁸ People respect those who work hard, their skills are endorsed on LinkedIn.
³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.	³⁰ It's not about looking good, or being seen to work well when people are watching. Whatever you do, work at it wholeheartedly as though you were doing it for the Lord and not merely for people. (Col 3:23) When you are at work, God is there too. God is <i>at work</i> and God is <i>at work</i> .
³¹ Honour her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.	³¹ It is good to honour and affirm workers for all that they do: "Great job" "Thank you" "That is so good"

So in the primary layer of meaning, Becks has painted quite a radical picture of how the world of work is woven into the marriage relationship. And the housegroup translation amplifies how that applies to the different kinds of work you and I do today, whether married or single, male or female.

There's a lot in that poem, but here are three ideas I'd like to pick out relating to our work:

- Firstly I'd love to see each of you enjoying **variety** in what you do, just like the person in the poem. I'd ask each of you to think "What is your work?" and come up with at least two answers. Like the woman in the poem it could include creative work, construction work, trading, charity work, management, finances, work at home or a long way from home. Unpaid work or paid work if you are able. It can be study, it can be the basics of survival. So "What is your work?"
- Secondly I'd love you to catch the **enthusiasm** for work you see in this poem and chase away your laziness. "She sets about her work vigorously" It is good to work. If you are studying, get stuck in, it's not about doing the minimum to pass an exam – love learning. If you are caring for children or elderly relatives and keeping the house going, it can sap your energy. In paid work, there are so many ways for morale to sink, or company time to get wasted. The call of Jesus is to do our work as though for him. And it is in fact that alignment to him that can be the source of our enthusiasm and energy for work.
- Thirdly, I'd love you to see your work as a way of **serving and blessing others generously** either directly, or through what you earn, or both. V20 "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy". I already mentioned the charitable side of this. But have you thought about being generous to the people you come across in your work?
 - Someone needs help with a practice exam question.
 - The person you are caring for has yet another need.
 - A co-worker doesn't know how to use Excel and you take the time to show them.

Now clearly our time isn't unlimited, but I believe a characteristic of following Jesus at work is serving and blessing others generously. In my workplace I often see recognition that someone has "gone the extra mile". I don't think they know they are quoting Jesus, or that that generous action is a reflection of a value of the Kingdom of God.

Wrap up

So let me draw this together in summary.

In your own time, will you take another look at this poem, and **look for the layers of meaning** about women, work, wisdom and maybe even the Holy Spirit. You can download more copies of the handout from our website and scribble on them as you try to hear what God might be saying on those topics. Do it on your own or in housegroup. Don't invent stuff, don't twist it, just look at it from different perspectives.

Secondly, I would love you to **value wisdom**. Treasure the insights that help you live life well. Seek out godly wisdom – shape your life by your relationship with God.

Thirdly, I would love you to **work well**. Look for variety. Go at it with enthusiasm. Find ways to serve and bless others generously.

David Wallace

21 June 2015