

## Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 21

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This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 21 in Praise of Wisdom, Proverbs chapter 31:10-31.

Welcome to talk on the last section of the book of Proverbs.

It is often known as the poem about the virtuous woman, but it deliberately has been written and placed, at least it deliberately has been placed, as the conclusion to the book of Proverbs. However, before I begin to reflect on this last section of Proverbs, I just want to say that this is March the 4th, 2022. It is the heat of the invasion of Ukraine.

I am very, very conscious of that. That is where my mother was born. I have visited Ukraine, and I wore this tie, especially today because it was bought in the city of Kharkiv.

And as we speak, the city of Kharkiv has been bombed relentlessly. I do often wonder what the marketplace looks like where I bought this tie. It was a huge marketplace with endless numbers of goods from China at that point in time.

But this tie speaks to me of my Ukrainian roots. And I just want to make note of the fact that I am very conscious of what's happening there this morning. But what we want to do this morning is look at the poem in Praise of Wisdom in Psalm in Proverbs chapter 31, verses 10 to 31.

Now, we need to first of all point out that this poem is what we call an acrostic. It probably is a term that is familiar to most of you. An acrostic is used in various psalms.

In fact, the longest psalm in the Bible, Psalm 119, is an acrostic. What an acrostic does is begin each successive line with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So, the first letter is Aleph, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, He, and so forth.

So, the first line will begin with Aleph, the second line will begin with Bet, the third with Gimel, and so forth. Now, in Psalm 119, there are actually eight verses that begin with each letter of the alphabet, and so you get 196 because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. So, if there is a true acrostic, full acrostic, then there's going to be 22 lines.

We did note on the PowerPoint slides that Psalm 2 is a kind of an acrostic. Sorry, Proverbs 2 is a kind of an acrostic because it has 22 verses, and the 11th verse, the

midpoint of the poem, begins with the midpoint of the Hebrew alphabet, and it seems deliberately to have been structured as a long conditional sentence along the lines of an acrostic. But Psalm, Proverbs 2, has a very well-thought-out flow.

When we come to other acrostics, they're more of an association of ideas, the same way that we make acrostics in our own language. So, with this poem to the virtuous woman, we conclude the book of Proverbs. This poem has brought about a whole lot of discussion because of its obvious relationship to the woman of wisdom herself.

In fact, there are those who would read this poem as a personification of wisdom. Now, what we did notice is that there is a personification of wisdom at the beginning of the book of Proverbs, in chapter 1, where wisdom makes her call to all mankind. And then there's another explicit personification of wisdom in chapter 8, where she is God's companion and the one who is part of his ordering and creating the whole of our common home, the earth, and the universe.

And then she's personified very specifically in chapter 9, where she offers the great banquet. So that forms the beginning and end of the introduction. And it's logical that at the end of the book of Proverbs, in chapter 31, we would reference again to Woman Wisdom.

Now, I think that we do have an allusion to Woman Wisdom, but I don't think that Proverbs 31 is to be read as if these were all metaphors about wisdom itself. So, to kind of clarify this discussion, I've thrown up a little slide here of an antithesis that's true all the way through the book of Proverbs. It's the antithesis of wise and foolish persons.

So, what we have is the abstract concept, and here's where personification takes place. Folly is a woman, and wisdom is a woman. Then we have an actual life representation of these individuals.

And so, the strange woman, the foreign woman, or the sensuous woman, represents folly as an actual individual in the world where you live and the person you may encounter. Whereas the virtuous woman is the example of the loyal and faithful wife, the one to whom a husband is absolutely loyal and is a lifelong partner, and they form the family where the parents teach the children the very model that Proverbs exemplifies. And then we have the personification, which I've talked about, which is not just the concept of folly, but rather is the way in which you would personify this concept, the way in which you would give this concept personal characteristics.

And so in Proverbs chapter 9, the woman, folly, is boisterous, and she's loud, and she's everywhere out in the streets, and she's calling people. Now, of course,

foolishness itself doesn't do that. Foolishness is the kinds of things that people do, but it's personified as this kind of person.

Whereas the personification of the abstract concept of wisdom is lady wisdom, and she is the one who instructs you to use a different kind of picture the same way as you need food for your body, and you delight in that in a really well-prepared banquet in a spacious hall. So, the personification of Lady Wisdom is that in dispensing what we need to know in order to live, she has this great banquet hall in which she has prepared everything that we need to know. Now, the term virtuous woman comes from a Hebrew word that is used fairly often of women or men.

It is the word Hayil. That simply means someone that is strong. Now, they can be strong in various ways.

They can actually be physically strong, but this term is also used in terms of character, that they are a person of very strong moral character, or they are a person that is not easily influenced to do wrong because they have strength. There is the complement to what we call the virtuous woman in Proverbs that is to be found in various of the Psalms, and I thought it would be worth our while to spend just a little while looking at this complement as it's found in the Psalms because it's only here in Proverbs where wisdom is personified as a woman that we get an actual description of a strong woman, though there are in the Bible numerous women that are referred to as Hayil. They are people who are strong, and as a matter of fact, in some of the books that I have authored where I have dedicated to my wife, I have used the Hebrew word Hayil to describe my wife, because I think it's the most complimentary thing you can say of any person, whatever.

Psalms chapter one is not specifically about a man or a woman. It's really about a person, though of course in the Hebrew language, and in most translations, it comes across as if it were male. Blessed is the man, but that is generic.

It's inclusive. Blessed is the person. The person who is strong, the person of Hayil, can most readily be characterized by this other term that we've referred to several times.

Blessed is the person who has wisdom. They are like a tree of life, which is what we had in Proverbs chapter three. So, Psalm one begins that way.

It begins with the word blessed. As we've noted earlier in our lectures here, and what makes this person strong? Well, it's their mind. It's what's happened in their mind.

This is something that's a characteristic of Proverbs. What is wisdom? It's an effort. It takes work.

It takes learning, and you have to put all your energy into it all of your life long, because life is always presenting you with new circumstances, and you always need to be learning again how to exercise those virtues and values and qualities that are true of wisdom. The other thing that is true then for Psalm chapter one is not only that this instruction or Torah is embedded in their minds and that they think about it, that it controls their minds day and night, in other words, in every step of their lives, but they then become like a tree, which is by an irrigated stream, and therefore is always yielding its fruit. And that is the same thing that Proverbs has said over and over again about righteousness, about wisdom.

In Proverbs 3, wisdom is a tree of life. In Proverbs 11, verse 30 or so, we looked at wisdom as a tree of life, which yields its fruit, and the one who captures souls is wise, to use Tyndale's version of that verse. In other words, a person of this character has just a very positive influence and makes a good legacy that is felt by everyone that is around them.

So, that's a generic introduction that we have in Psalm chapter one, but we can go further to Psalm chapter 15, where we have this kind of character described more specifically. What is this fruit that belongs to the tree of life? And if we go to Psalm chapter 15 in verses 2 and 4, you see that this is a person of integrity, that they're trustworthy, that they know the fear of the Lord, and of course, that's the mantra of wisdom, and the mantra of the book of Proverbs. And then, on the negative side, there's no slander or reproach against the neighbor, there's no financial abuse.

I'm paraphrasing, of course, what Psalm 15 actually says, but I invite you to go back to that Psalm and look at the kind of person who has this virtuous or strong character. They know what the fear of the Lord is. But most specifically, I want to call a parallel to Psalm 111 and Psalm 112, because Psalm 112 is an acrostic that is almost a precise parallel to what we have in the virtuous woman in Proverbs chapter 31.

So, in Psalm 111, what we have is an acrostic of the person who praises God. This is the one who knows what the fear of the Lord is. And the word for praise here is the word blessed, but it's not *asherah*, it's the word *barak*, which means that this person gives honor and glory to God.

And then Psalm 112 gives the character description of what kind of person does that, and this is the person in turn then that is praised or blessed by God. Now, if you compare the virtues that are signaled in Psalm 112 with the virtues of Proverbs 31, 10-31, the parallels here become obvious. What is a strong person? Well, it is the person that understands human relationships, a person that understands how to trust God and be submissive to God.

These are fundamental, and they issue in things that have been described as justice and righteousness and equity. The three words that summarize wisdom, as we have them in Proverbs 1, in the exordium to Proverbs, and then again in Proverbs 2, then you shall have wisdom and you shall have righteousness, justice, and equity. Now, how do you see these actually manifest? Well, you see these manifest in ordinary daily activities, which is what Proverbs 31, 10-31 is all about.

It's all about the activities that would occupy someone who is responsible for those around them. In the case of virtually every woman in Israelite culture, that would be responsible to her husband, responsible to her family, responsible to make provision for their life and well-being in the most ordinary of things, in the preparation of their food, in the wearing of their clothes, which would require other kinds of activities, like she might have to contemplate a field and buy it. She might have to make products that she sells to the merchants so that she has some resources.

All of these things are the sort of examples that are given here for the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31. This woman of strength is not some queen who is in a palace whose task it is to be a consort to the king to represent the king in his various different kinds of appearances. It has nothing to do with that.

This is a real person, the kind of person that you meet every day, but more than that, most of all, the kind of person that you want to strive to be in every way that you can. This, of course, doesn't mean that you're a perfect person, but it does mean that you're a very competent person, and it does mean that you're a very responsible person. Now, this representative woman that we have here in Proverbs 31, she's loyal to her husband.

Her husband praises her, and in turn, her husband is a distinguished person who knows how to lead. He sits in the gates and helps reconcile differences, deals with cases that are brought for justice, and all those kinds of things. It's an ideal that's exemplified.

It isn't going to be true of every one of us, but all of us do those kinds of things. If we're a parent, sometimes we're the judge between conflicts that arise between our children. It's not any different.

It's just a different circumstance and a different kind of situation. So, all of us have to be these things. It's not just some of us.

So, just because Proverbs 31 says, okay, her husband is judging in the gates, well, maybe in most of our cases, her husband is the father, and he's responsible and knows how to reconcile with his neighbors or knows how to keep his family in harmony with each other, those kinds of things. And his wife is the industrious lady, and in ancient Israel, probably every lady did spin, but certainly this one did. She

takes the spinning rod and the distaff, that from which you pull the wool and that on which you wind the wool itself when it becomes a thread, and this is what she does, very ordinary tasks.

Now, the comparison is here to wisdom. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is the means by which God ordains the order of all creation. This is what God ordains for our lives and how we should live as people.

This is what we read in Genesis chapter 2, God created male and female, and a man would leave his father and cleave to his wife, and they too would become one. And so you leave your father and mother and you form a new social unit, the inescapable reality of what is best for children and for families, in spite of the of course, there may be exceptions. I have a single brother, he never married, but let me tell you, that single brother is a part of family and our family.

I will never forget one time when I happened to be preaching in the area where I come from, which is Yorkton, Saskatchewan, and my brother came to church, I don't know who all his friends and his families were. All I can remember is seeing my single brother in the middle of the pews, kind of in the middle of the whole congregation, and a bench full of children. I don't know who these children were, but they were crawling all over him, and he was like their father and their uncle.

And I knew that that was true because his farm was always full of children who would be there for half the summer. He was just integrated into people's families, that's the way that he was. I know that for single people there can be a lot of loneliness, and sometimes that's the problem of all of the rest of us.

But the fact is, then in the human order, the way God made things to operate, we are families, and that's how we represent God. You know, when God said we are to be his image and have dominion over all creation, it was clear that we do that as male and female. In other words, not do as individuals, but rather we do that collectively as people.

We represent God in his world as people. And so that's what this poem in Proverbs 31 exemplifies. It exemplifies the way in which we as people, if we know wisdom, will represent and know God in the world.

And so, this woman here in Proverbs 31 is like the mother of King Lemuel. She's the ideal of everything that a woman does. She is industrious, and she controls her household very well.

So, what function does this then have at the end of the book of Proverbs? Well, as I've already suggested, it's very deliberate because it's depicting wisdom as a woman. And it very deliberately exemplifies all of the things that have been said about the

Proverbs that we have been studying. It's a stark contrast to the pursuit of power and control, a stark contrast to the pursuit of wealth, a stark contrast to individual independence.

You know, this is the thing that bothers me the most. In our Western society, here where I live in Canada, we're so fixated on individual rights. And that really leads to this sense that I need to find my way as an individual, independent person.

That's what really matters. And of course, this is just wrong. We've just come through a pandemic here worldwide.

Maybe we're not even through it yet. And if there's one thing that's been evident is how interdependent we are. We had what we called essential services.

Why? Because I wouldn't have food to eat if somebody wasn't hauling it up across the border from the United States where they grow it in the wintertime. We're all independent, and interdependent. So, this is what this exemplifies.

But our greatest interdependence is within our inner world families and in our own personal relationships. So, it certainly does depict the real-life example of the personification of Lady Wisdom that is introduced at the very start of Proverbs and in the introduction in chapter 9. So, as you read this conclusion to Proverbs, read it as a way of an example in one person of all the kinds of things that you have learned as a wise person, listening to the teacher who has written down for us all these things that we may learn. Justice, righteousness, equity, and learn the fear of the Lord.

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