

# FINDING HONOR

God recognizes those who faithfully demonstrate His wisdom in their lives.

## PROVERBS 31:10-16,23-31

**MEMORY VERSE: PROVERBS 22:19**

- **READ** Proverbs 30:1–31:31, First Thoughts (p. 114), and Understand the Context (p. 114), noting the two new contributors to the Book of Proverbs. While reading Proverbs 31, note the characteristics and actions of a godly woman.
- **STUDY** Proverbs 31:10-16,23-31, using Explore the Text (pp. 115–119). Read Proverbs 12:24; 18:22; 19:14; and Ephesians 5:22-23. Familiarize yourself with **PACK ITEM 10** (*Handout: The Four Contributors*) or utilize a Bible dictionary for more information on Agur and Lemuel. Read Proverbs 31 in several different translations noting similarities and differences.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 120–121) and More Ideas (p. 122). Consult *QuickSource* or [goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderHelps](http://goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderHelps) for more ideas. Customize the plan to meet the needs of your group.
- **GAIN** insights from the weekly podcast on [goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderTraining](http://goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderTraining) or on iTunes.
- **GATHER** the following items:  Personal Study Guides,  A board or chart paper and markers. Prepare to display the following Pack Items:  **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outlines of Proverbs and Song of Songs*);  **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Key Words in Proverbs*);  **PACK ITEM 4** (*Poster: Wisdom Teaching in Proverbs*); and  **PACK ITEM 6** (*Key Verse: Proverbs 1:7a*). Make copies of:  **PACK ITEM 10** (*Handout: The Four Contributors*).



## KEY DOCTRINE

### *Man*

The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created humans in His own image, and in that Christ died for humans; therefore, every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love (Gen. 1:26-30).

## BIBLE SKILL

*Read, reflect on, and respond emotionally to a Bible verse.*

As you read Proverbs 31:10, notice the descriptive details that distinguish a woman of noble character, and spend time reflecting on how those traits would be displayed by a Christian woman who lives in today's world. Make notes of your reflections. Take the time to "find" the woman in your life who has exhibited in the most complete way the character traits described in the Bible passage. Be sure to thank the Lord for her.

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

Most of us go through our days and carry out our tasks without thinking somebody may be watching us. We would be surprised if we found out somebody had been watching us while we go through the day. We would be even more shocked if our observer addressed how we managed our time and the specific challenges we faced.

(In PSG, p. 100) **Share about a time when you became aware that someone was watching you. How did you respond when you realized they were doing so?**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## PROVERBS 30:1–31:31

These proverbs can be divided into two sections. The first section is in chapter 30. In the first verse, a person named Agur is identified as the writer of the proverbs in the chapter. Bible scholars don't know the identity of Agur. Some scholars have suggested he may have been Solomon himself. Others think he could have been one of the many individuals who served Solomon to collect the proverbs.

At the beginning of the chapter, Agur acknowledged his inability to know much about God on his own. Then he proclaimed that God's Word alone provided trustworthy insight into God's character and ways. Agur went on to ask God to keep deceitful words away from him. He asked the Lord to keep him from being either rich or poor. If he was rich, he pondered that he wouldn't need to call on God. If he was poor, he was concerned that he would begin to think that God didn't care about him (30:1-9).

The second section includes Proverbs 31. The writer identified himself as King Lemuel. Like Agur, his identity remains a mystery. He credited his mother for the proverbs in this chapter (31:1). She presented him with three valuable instructions that he should put into practice as he reigned over his kingdom. First, she instructed him to avoid the temptation to use his power as a means to engage in immorality or to destroy another king. Second, she taught him to stay sober by insisting that alcohol would have a negative effect on the decisions he would make as king. Third, she directed him to use his authority as king to speak up for powerless people and to seek justice for them (31:2-9).

Lemuel also provided a poem about a wife of noble character. The wife in the poem exhibited wisdom, foresight, initiative, and determination. She played a significant role in her husband's good reputation. Because of the way she invested her life, she deserved to be respected (31:10-31).

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## COMMITMENT TO HER HUSBAND (PROV. 31:10-12)

### VERSE 10

A *wife of noble character* is difficult to find, and a wise husband who experiences the blessing that comes by having such a woman in his life considers himself to be most fortunate. He sees her virtuous nobility in her goodness, intelligence, foresight, devotion, and resolve. These traits blend together to provide the portrait of a wife of impeccable excellence. For that reason, she's compared to the most *precious* stones anyone could find. They are rare; she is too. When the comparison has been completed, she's found to be worth more than *jewels* like rubies, diamonds, or pearls. In other words, she's priceless.

**A wise husband who experiences the blessing that comes by having such a woman in his life considers himself to be most fortunate.**

Ruth served an Old Testament example of a woman who had distinguished herself by her character. Boaz used the same Hebrew word for *noble* in his description of Ruth (Ruth 3:11). When people in the days of the Old Testament used this word to describe a man, they had in mind the character trait of valor or heroism. Ruth's reputation as a person of noble character had become known to everyone in Bethlehem who knew her.

### VERSES 11-12

A noble wife's devotion to her husband has a lasting effect on him. His *heart* serves as a reservoir of complete confidence in her, and he harbors nothing but enduring faith in her. He knows she'll be faithful to him in their marriage. Furthermore, he rests in the assurance that her keen understanding and good sense will direct her to make wise decisions. Consequently, he depends on her without any concern that she will let him down. His relationship with her gives him an excellent reason for depending on her. She consistently enriches his life in more ways than he could have ever imagined.

Because of her commitment to their marriage, he doesn't *lack* for anything. The Hebrew word for *anything good* brings to mind the plunder that a victorious army would bring home after a battle. Imagine the riches that would be gathered from the defeated army and the wealth to be taken from a fallen kingdom. Imagine too the joyful surprise on the faces of everyone back home when they beheld the plunder the victorious army brought to them. The husband of a noble woman enjoys that kind of surprise when he sees what she's able to bring into his life.

Living with a woman of excellent character makes the life of her husband most rewarding. Her commitment to him rewards him with a consistent supply of blessings. She's an asset to him. Those who know

### VERSE 10

<sup>10</sup> Who can find a wife of noble character? She is far more precious than jewels.

### VERSES 11-12

<sup>11</sup> The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will not lack anything good. <sup>12</sup> She rewards him with good, not evil, all the days of her life.

them as a couple agree she's the reason he's become a man who's settled, successful, and delighted with life. He himself would say he wouldn't know what would have become of him if the Lord hadn't brought her into his life. He'll testify that he's never felt threatened by her. She would never do anything that would bring harm to him. In fact, she wouldn't allow anything **evil** in their home or their marriage. Across the years that the Lord allows them to be together, she consistently brings good things to their home. As long as she lives, she can be counted on to be a blessing to her husband and the family the Lord gives to them.

**In your church family, who comes to mind when you think about the woman described in these verses?**

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## WISE IN HER WORK (PROV. 31:13-16)

### VERSES 13-16

In the days of Solomon, a woman earned a reputation of noble character by staying busy with projects that would benefit her family. For instance, she would give herself to the tedious chore of transforming shapeless clumps of **wool** and **flax** into thread. Wool came from sheep, and flax was a plant from which the bark would have been removed and shaped into linen threads. Consider the time that would have to be invested as well as the concentration that would be required for such a transformation. She made the investment because she wanted to supply clothing for her family and sell at the market other garments that she made.

In the same way, an industrious woman today deserves to be treasured because she doesn't waste her time. Instead, she uses it wisely and in the best interest of her family. She's consistently at work with **willing hands**.

When Solomon ruled over the kingdom of Israel, he extended the reach of commerce by building a fleet of ships. The ships would set out for foreign lands in search of trade. They returned home filled with supplies that would be sold to the people of Israel. At the same time, **merchant ships** from other nations would bring treasures to sell in Solomon's kingdom. (See 1 Kings 9:26–10:22.) The merchant ship was a fitting image of a woman of noble character who provided her family with what they needed. She would provide for her family food that came from **far away**. In other words, she would extend her reach to the farthest corners of her world in order for her family to have what they needed. She would exchange items she made with her hands for whatever she couldn't produce by herself.

Solomon had warned God's people to abhor laziness and to embrace industry (Prov. 6:6-11). A lazy person with no initiative would sleep well into the morning. A woman with noble character would greet the day well before sunrise. Her industrious nature would prompt her to be up and at it early in the morning. She would pay close attention to making sure her family had breakfast. She also gave the same attention to her **female**

### VERSES 13-16

<sup>13</sup> She selects wool and flax and works with willing hands. <sup>14</sup> She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from far away. <sup>15</sup> She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and portions for her female servants.

<sup>16</sup> She evaluates a field and buys it; she plants a vineyard with her earnings.

**servants.** The Hebrew word for **portions** could have referred to food. She wanted to be sure that her servants had something to eat. It could also have been a reference to duties. She would plan her work and instruct her servants on the tasks she expected them to complete before the end of the day. Taken either way, the word implied her initiative in directing the people in her home so they would be properly nourished and instructed.

Providing for the needs of her family would prompt a woman of excellence to engage in profitable business ventures. Her business savvy could be seen in the way that she carefully **evaluates** a piece of property that had been placed on the market. She would inspect it to see if purchasing it would be profitable. She didn't think about the purchase of the property in terms of personal luxury or self-indulgence. Instead, she thought only in terms of how the property would provide what her family needed. For that reason, she estimated the potential productivity of the land if she grew a **vineyard** on it.

This verse sheds light on the industrious ways of God's people who trust Him and seek His wisdom. We're determined to provide for our families and others in need, and we're always looking for the most prudent way to do it.

**What are some of the ways you demonstrate prudence as you make choices for your family?**

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## **SURE IN HER IN REPUTATION (PROV. 31:23-27)**

### **VERSES 23-27**

The description of the virtuous woman of excellence continued with an observation about another positive effect on her husband. Because of the stellar way she managed herself and her family, she enhanced her husband's reputation. In ancient Israel, walls protected a **city**. The **gates** built into the walls provided people with access to the city, and they served another important function too. A city gate served as the location where men would gather to conduct business and attend to legal issues. The husband of a woman of noble character would have a superb reputation there. Because of her, he would be considered one of the wise **elders** of the city whom everyone respected.

**Merchants** made their living by buying, selling, and trading merchandise from different parts of their world. Successful merchants developed a trained eye for quality. They could tell the difference between a valuable item and something worthless. When they traded in the city, they knew the woman of noble character by what she sold. They respected the skill and attention to detail she put into her workmanship. The distinction of her work would have been reflected in the products themselves. That's why they would admire the **linen garments** she made with her own hands, and the **belts** she offered for sale reflected the same level of excellence.

### **BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR**

For additional context, read "Food Storage and Preservation in the Ancient Near East," available digitally in the Summer 2020 *Biblical Illustrator* for Explore the Bible at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

### **VERSES 23-27**

<sup>23</sup> Her husband is known at the city gates, where he sits among the elders of the land. <sup>24</sup> She makes and sells linen garments; she delivers belts to the merchants.

<sup>25</sup> Strength and honor are her clothing, and she can laugh at the time to come.

<sup>26</sup> Her mouth speaks wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue. <sup>27</sup> She watches over the activities of her household and is never idle.

Her attire consists of more than just clothing. She also wears the traits of **strength and honor** like tailored garments that fit her well. Such noble traits prove to be important assets to her and her family in a number of ways. However, the most important way comes into view in this verse. Because of her character, the future doesn't frighten her. She faces the uncertainties of the **time to come** with stalwart determination. Instead of wringing her hands with anxiety as she deals with unsettling challenges that greet her, she **can laugh** about them. She has complete confidence that she can handle the struggles that will come her way.

Her influence on the people in her life through what she says to them also speaks volumes about her reputation. She takes every opportunity to share God's **wisdom** with them. She's eager to show them how to see things God's way so they can do things His way. She seeks God's wisdom herself, and she has found that being wise in Him makes a monumental difference to her. Because she cares about her husband, her children, and others with whom she lives and works, she wants them to walk with Him, seek His wisdom, and experience the peace that He gives to His people. She gives **instruction** with a **loving** spirit. For that reason, what she says comes across as God's wisdom shared in kindness.

Instead of wasting her days in self-indulgent luxury, she takes the initiative to manage her day wisely. Guiding others under her supervision as well as managing her own projects requires her to make the best use of her time. Therefore, she's **never idle**. She never takes a break when it comes to caring for her family or attending to her other responsibilities. Her industrious approach to each day serves as a worthwhile model for believers. A commitment to work coupled with good stewardship of time helps to nourish a good reputation that speaks well of our relationship with the Lord. In turn, our reputation serves as a way to have a positive impact on others for Christ.

**What kind of influence for the Lord does your reputation have on others?**

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## HONORED THROUGH FEARING GOD (PROV. 31:28-31)

### VERSES 28-29

The reputation this noble wife gains for her husband fills her heart with joy. Also, the respect that comes her way from the people who work under her supervision and the merchants who respect her workmanship certainly gives her a sense of satisfaction. But nothing would compare to the affirmations her **children** give her because of her investment in their lives. When they shower her with appreciation for enriching their lives, they validate the value of her determination to see her role as their mother as a gift from God instead of a burdensome chore. With her words and actions, she shows them that she considers herself to be **blessed** to be their mother. When they notice they have been the recipient of her blessing, they lavish her with praise.

### VERSES 28-29

<sup>28</sup> Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also praises her:

<sup>29</sup> "Many women have done noble deeds, but you surpass them all!"

When her wise husband observes the blessing he's been given in such a remarkable wife, he can't stop singing her praises either. He's elated that he found in her what his heart longed for in life. That's why he declares her to be the best woman in the world. She surpasses **them all**.

### VERSE 30

The honor she receives comes from the way she honors the Lord. While everyone else may insist that **charm** brings honor, wise believers know better. We know that charm in and of itself can be **deceptive**. Charm can mislead the people who have been captivated by it. It's not a reliable indicator of what's really going on in a person's heart. Granted, a Christian can display authentic charm that emanates from a sincere heart. But deceptive charm ends up hiding more than it shows. Similarly, physical **beauty** cannot matter most because it's **fleeting**. Even the best efforts to preserve beauty will eventually fail because it can't last forever.

For believers, fearing the Lord brings honor because of the change He makes within us. Fearing Him doesn't mean being terrified by Him. Instead, it involves loving Him in response to His love for us. In that kind of loving relationship, we're eager to obey Him. We're ready to serve Him in loving obedience because He's our Father and we're His children. Along the way, we may **be praised** for the evidence of our walk with Him. What matters most to us, however, is honoring Him.

### VERSE 31

A life of devotion to the Lord renders a reputation that brings honor. Christian women who embrace the model provided in Proverbs 31 and take it to heart deserve to be honored. The **reward** of affirmation can encourage her as she strives to live out the model she's embraced. She is treasured because of her walk with the Lord and the way she expresses it in everything she does. Her **works** share the story of her devotion to God. Nothing more needs to be added.

In the days of the Old Testament, praise greeted a respected person in public as well as private settings. In the case of the godly wife whose noble character traits set her apart from other women, a public display of honor took place at the **city gates**. There, before the leaders of the city, they called attention to her and affirmed her because she honored the Lord with her life. Her excellent example provides Christians with the wise path to living in a way that honors Him.

**How do you honor other believers who show that they live to honor the Lord?**

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### VERSE 30

<sup>30</sup> Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the LORD will be praised.

### VERSE 31

<sup>31</sup> Give her the reward of her labor, and let her works praise her at the city gates.

# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

**INTRODUCE:** *In today's world it's easier to have someone watching you than in previous generations. We have cameras on intersections for traffic control or enforcement. Stores have security cameras to stop theft. Even homes have cameras for security. Doorbells even allow people to see remotely who is at their front door. Ask: In your home, do you have someone watching you?*

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to discuss with a neighbor a time when they became aware that someone was watching them and how they responded when they realized someone was watching.

**TRANSITION:** In today's session we see a picture of an ideal woman who faithfully demonstrates God's wisdom in her life. The characteristics described in Proverbs 31 set a high standard of character and conduct. Only through our relationship with Jesus Christ are we able to achieve God's ideal.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**MINI-LECTURE:** *Proverbs 30 is identified as the sayings of Agur, and Proverbs 31 is credited to the wisdom of King Lemuel and his mother. Using Understand the Context (p. 114), **Pack Item 2** (Outlines of Proverbs and Song of Songs), and **Pack Item 10** (Handout: The Four Contributors), provide background information for the group. In addition, explain that in the Hebrew language, Proverbs 31 is a skillfully-crafted acrostic where each verse begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet. This passage is also known as a wisdom poem.*

**EXPLAIN:** *Regardless of what we know and don't know about Agur and King Lemuel, it's apparent that Solomon's wisdom extended to others and that Solomon associated with wise people. Proverbs 31 reinforces other sayings by Solomon in Proverbs. Reference Proverbs 12:24; 18:22; and 19:14.*

**READ: Enlist a volunteer to read Proverbs 31:10-12**, as the group listens for the godly woman's commitment to her husband.

**PARAPHRASE:** Lead the group to express how they would state these verses in today's language.

**ASK:** *How does the keeping of the marriage commitment bring honor to God? To the family? (PSG, p. 103)*

**READ: Read aloud Proverbs 31:13-16**, while the group lists the actions of the godly woman.

**RECORD:** On a board, write the actions listed by the group.

**DISCUSS:** *How would each of these actions translate into today's world? Use the commentary under Verses 13-16 on page 104 of the PSG for guidance. Record responses on the board.*

**STATE:** *It's very evident that the godly woman works and is not lazy. Whether inside the home, outside the home, or caring for others, the godly woman is industrious and honors God both in her attitudes and actions.*

**ASK:** How does the portrait of a godly woman painted in this passage compare to how society defines a successful woman today? (PSG, p. 105)

**READ:** Enlist a volunteer to read Proverbs 31:23-27, while the group listens for descriptions of a godly woman's character.

**IDENTIFY:** Lead the group to identify the character qualities discovered in these verses. List the character qualities next to the actions previously recorded on the board.

**DISCUSS:** Guide the group to create teams of two to four to discuss the following question: *What happens when character is disconnected from right conduct, even if the conduct is right?* (PSG, p. 106) Call for volunteers to share their findings.

**READ:** Read aloud Proverbs 31:28-31, directing the group to listen for how God honors the faithful woman.

**ASK:** What are some appropriate ways of honoring women in society? (PSG, p. 107)

**EXPLAIN:** King Lemuel recognized that many people honor the wrong things, but that God honors a godly woman who "fears the LORD."

**TRANSITION:** Proverbs 31 paints a picture of the ideal woman in God's eyes. Each of us today can examine the actions and character portrayed and have a standard for godly living today.

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## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

**SUMMARIZE:** Briefly review the actions and character qualities listed on the board. Then lead the group to discuss which actions and characteristics present the biggest challenge to most people.

**STATE:** We began the session by recognizing that someone is always watching. Hypothetically ask: *Will the person watching you see a model for godly living in your marriage, as you interact with your children or grandchildren, in your relationship with others outside the family?*

**CHALLENGE:** As you reflect on people you influence, consider how you're influencing them to honor God. Ask: *What needs to change for you to have a greater influence on others for God's honor?* (PSG, p. 108)

**REFLECT:** Lead the group to consider how they're honoring the people in their lives who provide them encouragement and support for godly living. Using page 108 in the PSG, ask: *List the needs of your family, including spiritual needs. What actions can you take to help meet the needs you identified?*

**REVIEW:** Point out that this session concludes our study of Proverbs. Direct attention to **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Key Words in Proverbs) and **Pack Item 6** (Key Verse: Proverbs 1:7a) displayed in the room. Call for volunteers to express one thing they will take with them from this study on Proverbs.

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, thanking God for setting a high standard for character and actions that display to our families and others around us our relationship with Jesus Christ and our desire to honor Him. Pray that God would help us to remember others are watching to see how we respond so that we can be a positive influence in our families and communities.



## PRACTICE

- Prayerfully evaluate your own life in comparison to the characteristics and actions of a godly woman.
- Text or email individuals in the group to let them know that you're praying for them and their families this week.

## MORE IDEAS

### FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an alternate option for First Thoughts, prior to the session draw a stick figure on a board. Begin the session by asking the group to identify what they would consider as characteristics of the "ideal" person. Write the responses on the figure as they're named. Plan to return to the characteristics supplied by the group later in the session to compare the characteristics and actions provided in Proverbs 31.

### EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To expand the study of Proverbs 31:10-16, read Ephesians 5:22-23 and discuss how these verses relate to each other.
- To enhance the study of Proverbs 31:23-31, lead the group to read the verses in several different translations to note specific words differences. Use **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Wisdom Teaching in Proverbs*) to explain the meaning of a wisdom poem. Review the handout and identify the other types of wisdom teaching that the group has studied during this unit. Ask: *How has your understanding of wisdom changed as a result of this study?*
- Discuss how the gospel of Jesus Christ empowers us to live faithfully in the roles to which God has called us.

### SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Since Proverbs 31 is a beautiful acrostic in Hebrew, lead the group to share one characteristic or action of a godly woman beginning with the letters in our alphabet. For example: A (Active in prayer), B (Believes in Christ), C (Cares for others). If there are letters that the group has difficulty naming a characteristic or action for, be prepared to share your own answer.

Guide the group to read the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 108) to summarize the session. Then lead them to reflect on how they would evaluate their own lives in comparison to the characteristics and actions they identified in their acrostic.

### SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

To begin the session, play the song "God Gave Me You," by Dave Barnes.