

WOMAN OF
Strength

a fresh look at Proverbs 31



Gina M Poirier

Woman of Strength

A Fresh Look at Proverbs 31

© 2017 by Gina Poirier, ginampoirier.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or redistributed in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, or otherwise) without my prior written permission, except for the use of brief quotations in a review.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Introduction: We Can Do It!

Do you know Rosie the Riveter?

She appeared as a cultural icon during World War II, to inspire the women who were holding down the home front. With the men gone, strong women were needed to do what was traditionally men's work. In Rosie's most famous depiction she is flexing her bicep while wearing work clothes.

There's something inspiring about a woman stepping up to the task, treading outside her comfort zone or traditional gender role, and ultimately **contributing to something bigger than herself.**

Over seventy years later, women are still drawn to that message. Think of all the strong female leads in your favorite shows and movies, the images of muscular women all over Pinterest feeds, the polarizing ladies who dare run for public office. The Internet is also ablaze with debate about what it means to be a strong mother.

We are surrounded with feminine inspiration. **Yet why do so many of us constantly feel inadequate and weak?**

Maybe we need a fresh perspective on this whole "strength" issue.

This devotional is just that: a fresh perspective. And we find it in an ancient text: the 31st chapter of Proverbs. Maybe you're familiar with this passage and you react to it by feeling inadequate and weak. Or maybe you think that it doesn't apply to modern women or to your life.

Yet its core principles are timeless and cultureless.

Whether you've never cracked open a Bible or you could recite Proverbs 31 from memory, there's something here for you. These passages of scripture contain something rich and powerful that can transform the way you look at your life.

This devotional is in a daily format, with journaling/reflection questions and resources for further study. However, please approach it using whatever method and pace works for you.

Are you ready to find true strength?

WE CAN DO IT!

Day 1: Inspiring Strength

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

—Proverbs 31:10

You've probably heard of her, this nameless, faceless, perfect woman of Proverbs 31. She has inspired/intimidated women for centuries. What exactly does "noble" mean, anyway? Other translations call her "virtuous woman" (KJV), "worthy woman" (ASV), "capable, intelligent, and virtuous woman" (AMPC), "virtuous and capable wife" (NLT), "woman of valor" (Orthodox Jewish Bible), and simply "capable wife" (NRSV).

These phrases are translated from a Hebrew phrase: *eshet hayil*. *Eshet* can mean "woman" or "wife," depending on the context. It's often translated into wife in this passage because the woman that the poem describes is obviously married (and of great worth to her husband!). The adjective *hayil* is a bit more ambiguous, which is why the translations vary. It often refers to strength, describing someone worthy and capable. In other parts of the Bible it describes physical/military strength (Exodus 14:4, Numbers 24:18), wealth/prosperity (2 Kings 15:20, Job 20:15), and character integrity (Genesis 47:6, Exodus 18:21, 25, Psalm 18:32). "The Hebrew profile of a 'capable' woman suggests a 'strong, valiant, heroic' woman, matching qualities usually associated with men of valor in military and monarchic settings." [\[i\]](#) Note again the Orthodox Jewish Bible translation: "woman of valor."

Sounds a bit like our friend Rosie, right? Just like Rosie, the Proverbs 31 woman represents an idea and might not have even been real. In fact, this depiction was written to a young man, that he might know what to look for in a wife. **It was not written to**

make women feel inadequate, but to paint a picture of this idea. It contrasts with other feminine ideals, namely beauty and charm (see verse 30).

Take a moment and let these definitions sink in. Then read Proverbs 31:10-31, reflecting on the rich meaning of *eshet hayil*.

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. What inspires you about this ancient "woman of strength"? What intimidates you?
2. Think of one of your heroes. What makes him or her heroic? Perhaps qualities like strength, bravery and self-sacrifice? How can this perspective help you when you read Proverbs 31?
3. If you still feel intimidation or other negative feelings about any part of the passage, start praying through them.

Want more?

The phrase *eshet hayil* is also used to describe Ruth (Ruth 3:11). Read her story and examine the qualities that make her a woman of strength.

Day 2: Strength in God

...[A] woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
—Proverbs 31:30

Let's start this section by skipping to the end of Proverbs 31. It's easy to be caught up in all the deeds that our heroic woman accomplishes and wonder...*but how?*

And it's right that you wonder, because few earthly women can keep their motors running like that without driving themselves insane. This relatively short passage in Proverbs 31:30 explains what powers her motor: *fear of the Lord*.

How does this woman "fear the Lord"? (This fear refers to respect and honor, not terror.) Does she pray and fast for hours a day, on top of her busy schedule? Does she volunteer for every opportunity at the synagogue? Does she have every line of Scripture committed to memory?

Proverbs 31 doesn't explicitly explain *how* she does it. But other passages in Proverbs provide insight:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. —Proverbs 3:5-6

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. —Proverbs 9:10

Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor. —Proverbs 21:21

Blessed is the one who always trembles before God, but whoever

hardens their heart falls into trouble. —Proverbs 28:14

Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. —Proverbs 30:5

Loving, respecting and honoring God comes first through a mindset and a willingness of heart. The lifestyle follows.

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. What do you think it means to "trust in the Lord with all your heart"?
2. Is it difficult for you to trust God? Why or why not?
3. Spend time in prayer about your heart and your "fear of the Lord."

Want more?

Choose a woman of the Bible and read her story (suggestions: Ruth, Sarah, Hannah, Esther). What did "fear of the Lord" look like for her?

Day 3: Strength in Work

She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. —Proverbs 31:17

Do you ever feel like you're spinning your wheels? Like no matter how hard you try, the house is never clean, you always come up short on the bills, nothing ever gets done? This can make you feel weak, inadequate and defeated.

The Proverbs 31 woman doesn't spin her wheels; she figures out how to channel her energy effectively so she can continue to work vigorously and not run out of steam.

Read the whole passage again and take note of her resourcefulness. For example, do you know why her lamp never goes out at night? It's NOT because she doesn't sleep! In cultures without electricity, it's customary to leave a lamp burning at night so people can see. You need to ration your oil to do so, [\[ii\]](#) and this requires planning ahead and organization (also see Matthew 25:1-13).

To be able to work vigorously and be equipped for the tasks in front of you requires planning, diligence and self-control. Some of us recoil at these words. If you're inclined to say, "That's not my style," consider these passages:

*Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. —
Proverbs 10:4*

*All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to
poverty. —Proverbs 14:23*

*One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys. —
Proverbs 18:9*

The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty. —Proverbs 21:5

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control. —Proverbs 25:28

Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies will have their fill of poverty. —Proverbs 28:19

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. What's your gut reaction when you think about concepts like work ethic and self-control?
2. How does God want us to view these concepts?
3. Choose one area in your life that feels out of control (housework, finances, work, etc.). Make goals and plans to improve it, little by little.

Want more?

Meditate on Proverbs 16:3. Becoming a better planner can be a monumental task, but there are a lot of resources available! Check out my [Pinterest board](#) for some helpful tools and ideas.

Day 4: Strength in Grace

She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. —Proverbs 31:25

All women (and men!) have insecurities. It's in our nature. Even those who seem the most confident can be trying to compensate for some perceived weakness.

When I feel weak and inadequate, I turn to the apostle Paul's words:

But [God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. —2 Corinthians 12:9

The woman of Proverbs 31 is a daughter of Eve just like the rest of us. No one is perfect all the time. I imagine her ruining recipes, overspending her money, fighting with her husband, losing her temper with her children, breaking dishes, and having days when she just feels ugly, inside and out. That wouldn't disprove any of her strength of character.

Why does she "laugh at the days to come"? Is it because she has so much confidence in her own abilities? Or because she never makes the same mistake twice or never succumbs to temptation? I certainly wouldn't be laughing if all I had to rely on was my own power to be perfect.

We already know that true strength comes from a heart that loves and serves the Lord (see Day 2). But what about those days when we love God and try our best and still fail miserably?

Through her knowledge of God, a woman like our hero of Proverbs 31 would have been clothed with strength and dignity because of

her confidence in God's grace. It's his amazing grace that us from the traps of insecurity, self-doubt and fear.

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. Think about times you feel confident versus times you feel insecure. Where do you put your confidence?
2. Write down three weaknesses in your character. Do they make your heart feel heavy? Pray that you can laugh about them—and even boast about them.
3. The Proverbs 31 was clothed with strength and dignity; if you are a Christian you are clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26-27). Do you believe that God's grace is sufficient for you to be a woman of strength?

Want more?

Two of my favorite books on this topic are [What's So Amazing About Grace?](#) by Philip Yancey and [Secure in Heart](#) by Robin Weidner.

Day 5: Strength in Compassion

She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. —Proverbs 31:20

If you're reading this, chances are you live in a safe and secure place, have an abundance of food to eat, and have more than adequate clothing and shelter. You are probably more educated than many people in the world. You are richly blessed, and you are probably very thankful.

We all know that we should be generous and compassionate and offer help to those who are less fortunate. But when it comes to day-to-day practice, we get busy and distracted.

The woman of Proverbs 31 has a full life. And yet she is never "too busy" to help those in need. Compassion is an integral part of her lifestyle. Serving others is a high priority, not something she squeezes in with her leftover time and money.

Consider these other Proverbs:

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. —Proverbs 11:25

It is a sin to despise one's neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. —Proverbs 14:21

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done. —Proverbs 19:17

Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses. —Proverbs 28:27

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the

rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. —Proverbs 30:8-9

In sum, a strong woman uses her strength and her resources to bless others. It is what God has called her to do.

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. Is helping others an integral part of your lifestyle? What do you think that would look like?
2. Do you feel guilty, or do you feel inspired to do more? Meditate on the Proverbs listed and pray that your heart may be one of overflowing compassion, not guilt.
3. Why do you think God calls us to help and serve others?

Want more?

List some practical ways that you can reprioritize your resources (time and money) so that you can better serve those in need. Make compassion a family priority! You can start with people you know, like bringing soup to a sick neighbor, and/or reach to the other side of the globe, like sponsoring or adopting a child.

Day 6: Strength in Wisdom

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. —Proverbs 31:26

One of the reasons the Proverbs 31 woman has a strong character is because of her wisdom. She seeks it and passes it on to others. Proverbs has over fifty references to wisdom. Here are a few:

For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. —Proverbs 2:6

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. —Proverbs 4:7

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. —Proverbs 9:10

Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. —Proverbs 13:10

The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception. —Proverbs 14:8

Nowhere does it say that someone is born with wisdom; it is acquired. The woman of Proverbs 31 is a seasoned wife and mother. Her wisdom has come through:

- Knowing and fearing God
- Taking advice (see also Titus 2:3-5)
- Experience and "giving thought" to her ways

If we are to follow this example, a woman of strength is someone who continuously pursues Godly wisdom and shares it with others.

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. Read Matthew 5:6. Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness and wisdom? How will this mindset benefit you?
2. Is there at least one person in your life with whom you exchange wisdom and advice?
3. Think of one of the hardest experiences you've been through in the past year. What did you learn from it? Write down the wisdom you have gained (or are still learning) and share it with someone. This type of conversation is a great place to start when exchanging wisdom with another woman.

Want more?

Much of the book of Proverbs is written as instruction to a young man. He encounters several allegorical women: "wisdom," (Proverbs 2:20-33, 4:5-9, 8:1-9:12), "the adulteress" (Proverbs 2:16-19, 5:3-20, 7:6-27) and "folly" (Proverbs 9:13-17). Last comes our hero of Proverbs 31. Study these characters, focusing on the value of wisdom.

Day 7: Strength in Rest

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

—Matthew 11:28

God did not create us to work endlessly. The need to recharge is prevalent in nature. To be strong, a woman must rest. Are you familiar with God's definition of rest?

It is a regular custom in modern Jewish families to sing the verses of Proverbs 31, called *Eshet Hayil*, as they sit down for the Sabbath meal on Friday evenings. [\[iii\]](#) Many Christians today aren't in touch with the Sabbath tradition and its meanings. Proverbs 31 doesn't even mention it, but we can assume that a family that worshiped God kept the Sabbath. Today we are not under the same obligation of the Old Testament Law, but we cannot ignore the timeless principles of Sabbath rest.

The concept of rest, or *menuha* in Hebrew, was established by God at creation:

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. —Genesis 2:2-3

"...[A]fter the six days of divine work creation was not yet complete. What it lacked, and thus what remained to be created, was *menuha*, the rest, tranquility, serenity, and peace of God [...] God's rest or *shabbat*, especially when understood within a *menuha* context, is not simply a cessation from activity but rather the lifting up and celebration of everything." [\[iv\]](#)

God created rest as a way to celebrate all he had made and instituted the Sabbath as a way to practice this rest. Sabbath rest is not a time to disengage but a time to worship and celebrate. This doesn't just mean going to church; it can mean sharing a meal with your loved ones, spending meaningful time together, praying, and thanking God.

Questions for reflection/journaling

1. How do you currently think about the concept of rest? How does it compare to *menuha*, i.e. time that is tranquil, serene and full of the peace of God?

2. Why do you think God instituted Sabbath rest?

3. How can you make "Sabbath time" in your schedule? Even if it's not on the traditional day of Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, other ideas include family meals and quality time spent together, community worship and prayer. A daily personal devotional time could also fall under that category.

Want more?

Two books that explore the concept of Sabbath in very different ways include [Living the Sabbath](#) by Norman Wirzba and [7: An Experimental Mutiny Against Excess](#) by Jen Hatmaker.

Conclusion

Do you feel inspired? Strengthened? Ready to become the woman God created you to be?

I've discovered that the more I study, the more there is to know. The concepts explored in this devotional are only the tip of the iceberg about being a Godly woman of strength. I hope you use it as a springboard into your own extended personal study.

A good place to start is simply to read the Proverbs. Proverbs 31 is the concluding chapter to this rich collection of wisdom. It is best understood in that context.

Don't forget that aspiring to the ideals of Proverbs 31 is a lifelong pursuit. You're going to have times when you feel weak and defeated. Remember to lean on God's grace and laugh at the days to come.

In his strength,

gina

[i] F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel* (Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 2012), 316.

[ii] Carmen J. Bryant, "The Proverbs 31 Wife: Fact or Fiction?" *LivingWell*

Counseling and Consulting (2004):

http://www.livingwellcc.com/images/Superwoman_translit.pdf

[iii] Wendy Zierler, "How to Read Eshet Hayil," My Jewish Learning:

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-read-eshet-hayil/#>.

[iv] Norman Wirzba, Living the Sabbath (The Christian Practice of Everyday Life): Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight (Brazos Press, 2006), 33.