

# Proverbs 31: A Mother's Wisdom

By  
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*“The words of King Lemuel, the utterance which his mother taught him: What, my son? And what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows?”  
-Proverbs 31:1-2*

Happy Mother’s Day! As with all our national holidays, these days exist to celebrate and honor certain facets of our culture that we view as important and worthy of praise. As the church, to the extent that these days reflect our Biblical values, and could deepen our appreciation for God, these days can serve as a time of meditation and exaltation of various important things that we may overlook in our daily lives. While last year I chose to give a teaching on the complementary roles between mothers and fathers, this year I think it would be a good idea to meditate on these two roles individually. And for Mother’s Day, I thought it would be fun to read through Proverbs 31.

The book of Proverbs was predominantly written during the golden age of the Israeli kingdom, by its most successful and wise king, King Solomon. Although Solomon ended up tainting his own legacy by succumbing to idolatry later in his life, for the majority of his life Israel thrived under his rule in a way that hadn’t happened prior, and never happened again. Thankfully, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, king Solomon immortalized his wisdom in his three cardinal books, Proverbs, The Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes, with Proverbs being his most famous.

This book is laid out as a conversation between a father and a son as the father instructs his son into the biblical concept of “wisdom”. It is important to understand at the outset that wisdom is distinct, though not separate, from intelligence. Intelligence has something to do with intellectual understanding. It is our ability to absorb and understand raw facts and information.

Wisdom on the other hand is the understanding necessary to *apply* that knowledge in practical ways. It is the ability to think critically about what we know, and to *practice* what we know in a way that accords with God’s character and His created order. This means that while wisdom is distinct from both intellect and ethics, in order to be truly wise we have to be both ethical and understanding. Which is why the book begins with this introduction:

*“The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding, To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion— A wise man will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.”*

*-Proverbs 1:1-7*

As I said before, most of this book was written by Solomon, but towards the end we get sections written by other authors, like king Agur, and finally the mother of someone named king “Lemuel” and it is this Proverb that we will be studying today.

Most know this Proverb as the description as the “virtuous wife”, or the ideal wife, but it is actually more than this. We have contained in these few short verses some of the greatest wisdom that any mother could pass down to her children, but here it is recorded specifically as a conversation between this mother and her son. Because of this, we can see an immediate difference in the way that this chapter begins versus how the rest of the book is described. When masculine wisdom is being handed down, it is direct and sometimes even harsh in its delivery. However, the feminine wisdom is given with a compassionate and intimate preamble:

*“What, my son? And what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows?”*

*-Proverbs 31:1-2*

For those who believe that King Lemuel is actually another name, or even a “pet” name for King Solomon, they see this chapter as a compassionate rebuke from his mother Bathsheba when he began to marry foreign women. But regardless of who we think this is, what stands out to me is the intimacy of her call to her son. I like how the “Pulpit Commentary” articulates this point:

*“Pro. 31:2 What, my son? Mah, “what,” is repeated thrice, both to enforce the attention of the son, and to show the mother’s anxious care for his good. She feels the vast importance of the occasion, and asks as in perplexity, “What shall I say? What advice shall I give thee?” “Son” is here not ben, but bar, one of the Aramaic forms which are found in these two last chapters. The word occurs also in Psa. 2:12. Son of my vows. This might mean, “son who was asked in prayer,” like Samuel (1Sa. 1:11), and dedicated to God, as the name Lemuel implies; or it may signify, “thou who art the object of my daily vows and prayers.” Septuagint, “What, my son, wilt thou observe*

*(τηρήσεις)? What? the sayings of God. My firstborn son, to thee I speak. What, son of my womb? What, son of my vows?"*

*-Joseph Exell - The Pulpit Commentary*

By repeating the phrase three times, she sets up an intimate connection with the one she is speaking to. This tells us that what follows is not meant to be instruction, which is what the majority of Proverbs is, but instead an impassioned plea. Whether the plea was proactive, meaning an attempt to protect her son from pursuing the wrong values, or reactive, an attempt to move her son to repent of the bad decisions that he had already made is not of consequence to us right now. What matters, and what will be repeated throughout this Proverb is that a mother's wisdom comes primarily through her genuine care and concern and not through her "right arguments".

This is a simple, yet profound point for the current era that we live in. For most of human history this was understood and seen as a great strength of women, and mothers in particular. It was the realm of the fathers to use a strong and steady hand to discipline the children into obedience and good conduct, but the tool of the mother was primarily her compassion and her nurture. This doesn't mean that women in the past didn't also use discipline with their children, just as men also would have compassion on their children and provide them with warmth and nurture, it is merely that this was the primary "power" of the feminine was not the loud strength of the masculine, but the tender care of the feminine.

This one point will help us understand the sheer gravity of the following Proverb. In our modern world, we have done a fairly good job of obscuring the role of femininity within the house and the beauty of motherhood. So for the rest of this study, let's meditate on this profound chapter of the Bible and see the true power of femininity that has been all but forgotten in our modern age.

## The Virtuous Wife

*"Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; So he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, And willingly works with her hands. She is like the merchant ships, She brings her food from afar. She also rises while it is yet night, And provides food for her household, And a portion for her maidservants. She considers a field and buys it; From her profits she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, And strengthens her arms. She perceives that her merchandise is good, And her lamp does not go out by night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hand holds the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor, Yes, she reaches out her*

*hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, For all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes tapestry for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies sashes for the merchants. Strength and honor are her clothing; She shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, And on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her: "Many daughters have done well, But you excel them all." Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, And let her own works praise her in the gates."*

*-Proverbs 31:10-31*

We will break apart the elements of this passage in greater detail as we go, but for now, let's look at this passage in a different way than we might be used to. Most of our Bibles were written from a perspective that we aren't that familiar with in the west, and that is symbolically not literally. Take the teachings of Jesus for a second. When He teaches in parables He is expressing heavenly values through earthly stories. So when He wants to explain how the truth of God's Kingdom spreads throughout the world, He uses the example of a sower planting seeds in the earth as a symbol for how truth is rejected and how it manifests and spreads in the heart of one who is faithful to cultivate it.

Jesus is not telling us to all become farmers if we want to spread the word of God, He is using this vocation to speak of a greater reality. This Proverb is no different. Lemuel's mother is not telling her son that the ideal woman must do all these things, she is using common examples of feminine roles within their society to explain the ideals of feminine strength to her son. We know this is the case because she begins her explanation with this phrase, "*Who can find a virtuous wife?*" This is instruction in finding a virtuous wife, not in training up a virtuous wife.

Meaning that if her son is to find such a woman to marry, in a literal sense, she can't be doing almost any of the things she describes because the woman being described is already a faithful wife and mother. These behaviors *represent* the ideals of femininity that he is supposed to recognize so that *when* he marries this woman these are the kinds of behaviors that she will exhibit.

Before we get into these symbols though, I wanted to point out something that I found fairly interesting, and will help us understand why this version of femininity is fading from our modern world. As I said before, though this chapter is not saying that women have

to *literally* do all the things that are described in this chapter, the things that are talked about were common at the time they were written.

This fact should teach us that the role of women in this particular society is a far cry from what we have witnessed in the west for the last few centuries. Notice that this wife and mother, who is clearly functioning as a “homemaker” is still a major economic engine within this family. She is administrating the household, which includes making financial decisions, she is taking care of the servants, she is investing their resources in purchasing new land, she is buying and selling various fabrics, and she is making the clothing that the family wears.

While this description would not have seemed strange at all to all of our ancestors, this does seem strange to us in the west. But why is that? In a word, it all comes down to the industrial revolution. I first learned this from an author named Andrew Klavan, but this is how he puts this point in his excellent book “The Truth and Beauty” when he is commenting on Proverbs 31:

*“But with the coming of the Industrial Revolution in the mid eighteenth century, much of the practical and economic usefulness of women began to be stripped away. Factories destroyed many of the home industries that gave women their rubies-plus economic standing. Women were once called the “distaff,” after the device with which they made clothing - a hugely important enterprise, almost as necessary as food, which women also helped create. Now, with the new machines, cheap, inexpensive clothing was made in ‘dark, Satanic mills outside the home. Food, utensils, furniture would all one day be mass produced.”*

*-Andrew Klavan - “The Truth and Beauty”*

This material reality took away the economic power of women within the economy. Now if women were to participate in the economy, they had to do so in the same way that men did. Also, because of the industrial revolution, women began to be able to do the same work that men were solely responsible for. Prior to these massive machines, a culture was dependent on the raw physical strength of men to run farms and manufacture tools and homes. But the new revolution completely changed our views of masculinity and femininity in such a way that we have never fully recovered. Which is why the first public feminist just so happened to start cultivating the ideas of feminism right after this revolution and why all subsequent feminists just so happened to only live in the west, in countries that had been shaped by the Industrial Revolution.

Subsequent technological advancements have made this problem much worse and more pronounced. Everything from the pill that allowed women to pursue sexuality

without the normal consequence of pregnancy, which men had been immune to by dint of our biology, to baby bottles, which allowed men to feed babies during a stage of development which historically, only women could, exasperated our gender confusion until we get to our modern day where the confusion is at a historical high point.

Therefore, what began as a well-meaning cultural shift that responded to the new world that technology had brought us to and to figure out the place of femininity in our modern world has instead all but erased the category of women. As the former feminist Carrie Gress puts this point:

*“Feminism’s failure, at root, is its misdiagnosis of what ails women. Feminists have worked hard to mitigate women’s suffering, but by trying to eliminate our vulnerability, by making us cheap imitations of men, and by ignoring our womanhood. Setting off in the wrong direction, the prescribed fix can’t really fix anything. Instead, it has erased women one slow step at a time. As those slow steps get faster and faster, women find themselves at risk of being erased from the movement that once purported to liberate them, finding themselves undefined in an increasingly progressive world.”*

*-Carrie Gress - “The End of Woman”*

This is the key point, while understandable in its inception, the cultural victory of feminism has, in effect, made women “*cheap imitations of men...*” This is why Hollywood is all but incapable of writing convincing female protagonists who show the power of femininity. They are merely “*cheap imitations of men...*” who save the day in the same way a man would.

We are a far cry from the western world that shrouded themselves in images like this one of Mary carrying Christ in her arms:



This was understood as the *power* of femininity throughout the world. This doesn't mean that the west rejected strong women, or that we believed that this is *all* a woman could be. But that was the key symbol of what feminine power was all about. It wasn't about acting as a man, but instead about creating and cultivating life. Take the Proverb that we are studying as a key example. The mother of Lemuel is stepping in to instruct her son in a way similar to the way that a father would. However, she never loses her feminine power in the counsel that she offers.

It is her feminine attributes that illuminate this wisdom and this feminine wisdom is exactly that our world needs more than ever.

## Spirit and Flesh

*"Do not give your strength to women, Nor your ways to that which destroys kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Nor for princes intoxicating drink; Lest they drink and forget the law, And pervert the justice of all the afflicted. Give*

*strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to those who are bitter of heart. Let him drink and forget his poverty, And remember his misery no more. Open your mouth for the speechless, In the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, And plead the cause of the poor and needy.”*

*-Proverbs 31:3-9*

So what is the feminine wisdom that is offered here? For the majority of the Proverbs, the masculine wisdom offered is practical and material, both in its practice and its benefits. Take the following well-known Proverb as a key example:

*“He who oppresses the poor to increase his riches, And he who gives to the rich, will surely come to poverty.”*

*-Proverbs 22:16*

In masculine wisdom we are told that if we act selfishly and in our own interests, we will end up receiving the opposite result than what we are seeking. It might *seem* wise, in a purely pragmatic sense, to ignore the needs of those who are needy, since they can't actually provide us with any material wealth, and instead give our money to rich people who might pay us back with interest. But the masculine wisdom is that the world doesn't work that way. If we only use money in self-interest we become greedy and short-sighted. This is a sign to those around us that we are not to be trusted and we will end up with no friends or help, which will result in material poverty. But if we cultivate sincere generosity we will gain *trust* from our fellow man and in this trust we will gain material success.

While a similar lesson is in this Proverb, it is given in a completely different way:

*“Open your mouth, judge righteously, And plead the cause of the poor and needy.”*

*-Proverbs 31:9*

Virtually the same lesson, use your wealth and power to help the poor and needy, but she doesn't give a material motivation to her son, she merely expresses this as moral instruction attached to innate kindness and compassion. This is not to say that men are naturally more selfish than women or anything like that, but that God has created men and women to have predominantly different value structures.

Take a young boy versus a young girl. A young boy is predominantly interested in playing with toys that expand his curiosity and fashion fun games. This is why every toy in a boy's hands turns into a tool or a weapon. While girls innately turn their attention to nurture and hospitality. Most of the girls' toys will be dolls and accessories and her

games will be more about dress-up and tea time. This should tell us something, the masculine impulse is to find meaning in matter, but the feminine impulse is to find spirit in matter.

Think about a house for instance. A man's desire in the house is to make it functional. He wants the house to have the proper form, to keep out the elements, to be stable, and that the elements in the house work properly. What he isn't interested in is making the house a *home*. Meaning that he isn't interested in making the house feel welcoming or "pleasant".

In a satirical book called "The Diary of Adam and Eve" the author Mark Twain makes a fictional account of Adam and Eve's lives told in a journal format. This short book is not only one of the funniest books that I have ever read, but it actually does show this distinction between men and women better than most books that I have read on the subject. In one sequence, the newly created Eve is trying to get the attention of Adam, but can't seem to interest him in having a conversation with her, which is what she wants most. Later on she makes this comment:

*"...but I already begin to realize that the core and center of my nature is love of the beautiful, a passion for the beautiful,"*

*-Mark Twain - "The Diary of Adam and Eve"*

Adam is too focused on material values that he can't see *spiritual* values. He wants to make the garden functional and he wants to understand how it works, but he isn't interested in the more profound questions of life which have to do with love, fidelity, and beauty. Later on Eve accidentally discovers fire and has this internal monologue:

*"No—he would not care for it. He would ask what it was good for, and what could I answer? for if it was not GOOD for something, but only beautiful, merely beautiful— So I sighed, and did not go. For it wasn't good for anything; it could not build a shack, it could not improve melons, it could not hurry a fruit crop; it was useless, it was a foolishness and a vanity; he would despise it and say cutting words."*

*-Mark Twain - "The Diary of Adam and Eve"*

This one simple, yet profound difference between men and women furnishes the bulk of our misunderstandings and our disagreements. Men can be so fixated on the practical that we forget the spiritual. This difference is also seen in the creation itself. Eve literally means "life" or "life-giver". She is seen and named in accordance with her role as a mother because that is what women can uniquely do. Their physical bodies can cultivate life itself. Within the womb, it isn't just a lump of flesh that is growing, but a

human life. This is what women can uniquely do that men struggle with. They don't just see matter, they see the spirit hiding beneath the matter.

Take note of what the ideal woman is doing in this passage. She doesn't just see raw textile, she sees the means to clothe her family. She doesn't see empty land, she sees the place that can cultivate food and resources. She doesn't see the poor and needy as drains on economic resources, she sees their humanity and calls her son to see that as well. And on the opposite end. She doesn't simply see an attractive woman, she sees the means of her son's undoing. She doesn't just see wine, she sees the foolishness that wine can produce.

To see the world in purely material terms is a world that has gone wrong, a world that has gotten rid of feminine values. This is one way to understand the world of the anti-Christ:

*"He shall regard neither the God of his fathers nor the desire of women, nor regard any god; for he shall exalt himself above them all."*

*-Daniel 11:37*

"The desire of women" could mean many things, but I think that one particular thing it could mean is what we are talking about. A world that is unstable and destructive is a world that can only perceive masculine values. A book that articulates this well is Bram Stoker's "Dracula". Dracula is a man who has lost his soul. As such he has become a creature that is almost pure matter. He lives in a desolate castle that is both luxurious and haunting. He sees other people as mere food and his only goal in the novel is to simply keep living forever.

When he seduces women and turns them into vampires, they become like him. Their bodies die so that they can't bear children, and instead they turn lustful towards men and feed on seduced men and infants. This is a way to understand modern culture. Sex is no longer an expression of love with the potential of creating life, it is merely a means of satisfying a physical appetite. Babies are not carriers of the divine image who can make us more human by learning to care for them in their innocence and helplessness, they are clumps of cells that can be killed if they threaten our material wealth or happiness.

Again, though I am trying to elucidate the amazing power of feminine values, this doesn't mean that masculine values are wrong, but that they are incomplete, and become monstrous without femininity there to tame it. But the reverse is also true, and herein lies the true irony of our present moment. We are subject to masculinity that is

not tempered by femininity, but also a femininity that is not strengthened by masculinity. That is why we are simultaneously overly compassionate towards the stranger and even the violent amongst us, but we are also cruel and threatening to our neighbors. I like how Andrew Klavan puts this point:

*“The unique power of the feminine, then, is not just to confer life on matter but to infuse life with creative humanity. Even God, when He wanted to become human, chose for Himself a mother. Without the experience of the feminine, a person may well become, as Wordsworth says, an ‘outcast... bewildered and depressed.’”*

*-Andrew Klavan - “The Truth and Beauty”*

## Strength

*“Do not give your strength to women, Nor your ways to that which destroys kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Nor for princes intoxicating drink...”*

*-Proverbs 31:3-4*

Though we have already spoken about this, it bears repeating. Once again, this advice is not only for those who are literally kings, but it is telling us that the ideal mother understands her son to be a “king” or a “ruler”. The power of the masculine is to rule, to have dominion and responsibility for the things around us. The feminine is not supposed to dissuade this instinct in men, which unfortunately many in our society today do, but to temper it. Notice that the mother doesn’t tell her son to give up his power or to rule in a weak and ineffective way, but instead she teaches him the purpose of his strength. To protect and provide for others.

Take the story “Beauty and the Beast” as a good example of this. The beast rules over his subjects as a tyrant. This is why all of his servants are objects, it is because that is genuinely how he sees them. They aren’t people who he is responsible for as their king, they are objects who live to serve at his pleasure. It is Belle who teaches him that this is wrong. The first time he uses his strength to help another person is when he saves her from the wolves, up until that point he only used his power to intimidate others into obedience. But when he learns this lesson, once again, he doesn’t give up his rule, but instead he uses it in a wise and just way. So the truly virtuous woman is not intimidated by power, nor is she jealous of power, but she is a woman who encourages men to use their power well. This is why later she says of the virtuous woman:

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

*-Proverbs 31:23*

To be known “in the gates” and to sit “among the elders” means that her husband exercises authority within the land. And the virtuous woman is not jealous of her husband’s authority, she doesn’t dissuade him from doing this, but she is proud and supportive of her husband while also helping him rule well with a care for the weak.

As Christians this makes sense. Jesus was the most powerful man to ever live. He could literally do whatever He wanted, and yet He used His power to help others and not merely to further His own agenda. This is a way to understand the temptations of Satan in the wilderness. In each temptation Satan is calling on Christ to take hold of His power for selfish purposes, but Christ refuses the temptation and leaves the wilderness.

This is something that women uniquely teach men. It is in the act of motherhood that a woman sacrifices her body for the needs of her child, who is definitionally, weak and dependent on her. But while motherhood is the ultimate expression of this, we are encouraged to see this instinct elsewhere in the virtuous woman:

*“She extends her hand to the poor, Yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.”  
-Proverbs 31:20*

Whether she is a mother or not, the virtuous woman is always seeking to subordinate strength to the benefit of others and not merely to the benefit of the self. We each experience this understanding of true strength in our infancy. When the strength of our mother’s bodies are used to hold us and to nurture us. The female body seems to have literally been created to do just that, to cradle and to nurture life. This is true of her external facets, but also her internal facets. And it is through our mothers that this great truth comes to be understood. As the poet William Wordsworth put this point:

*“...blest the Babe,  
Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep  
Rocked on his Mother's breast; who with his soul  
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!  
For him, in one dear Presence, there exists  
A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
Objects through widest intercourse of sense.  
No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:  
Along his infant veins are interfused  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature that connect him with the world.  
Is there a flower, to which he points with hand  
Too weak to gather it, already love*

*Drawn from love's purest earthly fount for him  
Hath beautified that flower; already shades  
Of pity cast from inward tenderness  
Do fall around him upon aught that bears  
Unsightly marks of violence or harm."  
-William Wordsworth - "The Prelude"*

The mother's arms don't just hold the infant up and protect them from the ground, they deliver warmth and care. It is this quality that the mother is encouraging her son to look for in a woman, but also the quality that she desires to see in him as well:

*"Open your mouth for the speechless, In the cause of all who are appointed to die.  
Open your mouth, judge righteously, And plead the cause of the poor and needy."  
-Proverbs 31:8-9*

## Beauty

*"Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall  
be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, And let her own works praise her in the  
gates."  
-Proverbs 31:30-31*

But she also teaches her son the purpose of beauty. It would be easy to look at the above verse and say that she is teaching him that beauty is deceptive in some way and not to be considered or valued. And yet, before she says that, she also says this:

*"She makes tapestry for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple."  
-Proverbs 31:22*

In the "Pulpit Commentary", Joseph Exell makes the following observation:

*"Her clothing is silk and purple. ψῠ (shesh) is not "silk," but "white linen" (βύσσοϛ, byssus) of very fine texture, and costly. Purple garments were brought from the Phoenician cities, and were highly esteemed (see So Pro. 3:10; Jer. 10:9). The wife dresses herself in a way becoming her station, avoiding the extremes of sordid simplicity and ostentatious luxury. "For my own part," says St. Francois de Sales, quoted by Lesetre, "I should wish any devout man or woman always to be the best dressed person in the company, but at the same time, the least fine and affected, and adorned, as it is said, with the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. St. Louis said that every one ought to dress according to his position, so that good and sensible people should not be able to say you are overdressed, nor the younger under dressed" ("Vie*

*Devot.,' 3.25). So the Church is clothed in fine linen, clean and white, even the righteousness which Christ bestows (Rev. 19:8), and invested in her Lord's royal robe, who hath made her children kings and priests unto God (Rev. 1:6; Rev. 5:10)."*

*-Joseph Exell - "The Pulpit Commentary"*

The virtuous woman arrays herself in clothing that is costly, and its value comes from its beauty not its utility. Meaning that it isn't that she has found the most practical clothing and for its practicality she pays a high price, no, it is the color itself that carries the high price. These two passages then give a balance. When she warns that "charm is deceitful and beauty is passing..." She isn't denigrating either of these things, but merely warning about their misuse. Since beauty is so attractive, just as charm is, it can be used to deceive another person. This is a call back to her earlier warning about giving his strength to women or his rationality to wine. She is telling him to not mistake beauty and attraction with something that is good or beneficial.

So what is the purpose of beauty? Once again, there isn't a material answer to this question, the true answer has something to do with the end of her statement:

*"But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised."*

*-Proverbs 31:30*

Beauty is itself a symbol of the true good found in God Himself. That is why the virtuous wife does dress beautifully. Beauty matters but not in a pure material sense, and it isn't always perceived in pure material terms. Meaning that when she warns her son that beauty fades, she is saying that physical beauty does indeed fade away, but its spiritual sense does not. This is why the apostle Peter exhorts women in 1 Peter 3:

*"Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel— rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God."*

*-1 Peter 3:3-4*

If a woman understands what beauty is for, she won't neglect beauty in its entirety, which is why Peter says "Don't let your adornment be *merely* outward..." He doesn't tell them to not adorn themselves, but only to make sure that the adornment is an expression of their spirits and not compensation for their lack of character and virtue, which unfortunately, beauty can often be just that. A way for a deceptive person to "hide" the flaws in their character to take advantage of others. A virtuous woman will

care for beauty because it is an expression of spiritual beauty, which means that she will temper her desire for beauty on the desires of her husband and the care for others.

This again is something that mothers uniquely show us. To become a mother means to, in some ways, to “mar” your physical beauty. By becoming pregnant a woman *willingly* puts her body through some pretty severe problems. This includes gaining weight, getting stretch marks, and foregoing her usual wardrobe. This doesn’t mean that a pregnant woman can’t be beautiful, quite the contrary, it is merely that a pregnant woman has sacrificed a portion of her beauty to cultivate a new life. This is an expression of this quality. The virtuous woman has learned to control beauty, to put it in its proper place. This is exactly what we see Jesus do for us:

*“He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him.”*

*-Isaiah 53:2*

Christ gave up His infinite glory to come to us in the form of an ordinary man. Then His body was torn and mutilated so that He could give us new life. This is why later in the same passage we are told:

*“When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities.”*

*-Isaiah 53:10-11*

The idea that Christ shall see His “seed” or His offspring means that He endures all this in much the same way that a woman endures to travails of pregnancy, for the life of her child. This comparison is made explicitly when we are told that “He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied.” The “labor” that He endures actually creates the offspring that He loves and that is why He is satisfied. So once again, it isn’t that the wisdom of the mother tarnishes material beauty, but merely encourages her son to see the spirit that is behind physical beauty. And the ultimate sign that someone is understanding this point is when they are willing to sacrifice beauty for the sake of another, just like a man must sacrifice strength and power in the service of others.

Once again, this is in “Beauty and the Beast”. While the beast is finding the purpose of his strength, Belle is finding the purpose of her beauty. In many ways, she scorns her beauty in the beginning of the movie. She resents that her beauty has attracted the despicable Gaston and she dresses in an overly modest form. But, when she notices

the Beast's attraction for her, she dons a beautiful dress that accents her beauty. She is no longer resentful of her beauty, but she embraces and even enhances this beauty for the admiration and praise of the one who she finds increasingly attractive, the beast who is learning to become a man.

In C.S. Lewis' book "The Great Divorce", he shows a woman in heavenly glory who is depicted as truly beautiful. And this is what he says of her beauty:

*"For clothes in that country are not a disguise: the spiritual body lives along each thread and turns them into living organs. A robe or a crown is there as much one of the wearer's features as a lip or an eye. But I have forgotten. And only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face."*

-C.S. Lewis - "The Great Divorce"

In the afterlife, Lewis sees that the spirit and the flesh have become one. The body is no longer a "mask" for the soul, but it becomes a full expression of the soul. So those in Hell have their bodies reflect the depravity of their souls, but the saints in heaven reflect the glory of heaven. But he comments that this beauty doesn't create unfaithfulness in heaven. It no longer draws us away from what is good, but it enhances it. He says that this woman's beauty somehow makes other men *more* faithful to their wives, not less. Again, there is more to say on this point, but let's move on to our final point, praise.

## Creation and Praise

*"Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, And let her own works praise her in the gates."*

-Proverbs 31:30-31

Another purpose of beauty has to do with praise, and this is also related to the act of creation. When an artist engages in any project, the true purpose of their activity is to create something beautiful and invite others to praise it. Look at how God is shown fashioning the world:

*"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy?"*

-Job 38:4-7

God intentionally created angels before the physical universe so that there could be praise during His act of creation. This same activity can be seen in mothers. They intentionally “show off” their children because they want their creation to be praised.

But why is this important? Because God has created us to praise and worship. It is only in the act of praise that we actively forget ourselves. Think about a gathering of people for a second. It is beauty that usually acts as a way to facilitate conversation. We usually have music playing in the background when we gather, or we have food at the center, or we go to see a movie or something like that. It is the beauty that acts as a catalyst for conversation.

People will notice and compliment the host on the beauty of their home or the lovely meal that they cooked, or even just the ambience around them. What we don't understand is that when beauty is gone, this “buffer” is also gone. Without anything beautiful to “de-center” our consciousness, we become self-conscious. And in our self-consciousness the conversation and the gathering loses its fun and actually becomes kind of miserable. If we think back to the most awkward social interactions we have had, we will notice that they lacked beauty of sorts.

We go to a party and the music is bad, the food is bad, the movie we went to see wasn't entertaining, and so on. The lack of beauty makes us complainers instead of people who can praise. Because women are the natural creators of beauty, which is why women are physically more beautiful than men, they also actively seek praise. This means that women are more vulnerable to the sin of vanity, being people-pleasers and those who demand praise for their efforts, and they also then can be vulnerable to false praise aimed at deception, the virtuous woman is able to balance praise with her innate virtue. Take for instance that God Himself actively seeks people to praise Him:

*“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”*

*-John 4:23*

Though God is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and truth, this does not make Him vain. God's motive is to *share* beauty with His creation, His delight is in the delight of others. This is something that women innately do. For sure, it is possible for a woman to fish for compliments when she hosts an event or wears a beautiful outfit, but this isn't necessarily the case, sometimes a woman is desiring to *share* beauty with another person. In motherhood this is seen most acutely.

A woman who brings her child into the world, wants to share the beauty and joy of her child with the world. In a sense, this beauty both centers around her and moves her out of the center of attention. Since it is *her* child, the praise is towards her “creation”, this means that others are now sharing in *her* joy and love for her child. This is another thing that our culture has forgotten, the center of creation is *love*. God doesn’t create in order to gain power or authority, God creates because of His great love for His glory that produced a creation in His image. In much the same way, the love of two people brings them together to create in their image. And the result of this creation is praise itself.

This is a tricky thing and one to meditate on this Mother’s Day. Having a day to celebrate mothers is a very natural and good thing. It is a celebration of this concept, beauty, creation, and praise. By doing this, we are meditating on an interesting aspect of God, that He delights in and loves His creation. Because He loves His creation He enjoys the praise given to Him over His great work and love. This is why heaven is depicted as an eternal state of praise and worship. It is in this place that Creator and created are unified in perfect harmony and bliss. In this place we are set free from our self consciousness and delivered into a reality of praise and thanks.

*“The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: “You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”*

*-Revelation 4:8-11*

## Clothed in Scarlet and Purple

*“She is not afraid of snow for her household, For all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes tapestry for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple.”*

*-Proverbs 31:21-22*

I wanted to end this by looking at this more obscure passage. It says of the virtuous wife that she clothes her household in scarlet and clothes herself in purple. These two colors have a lot of cultural and symbolic importance, and so I thought it would be good to meditate on these things for a short time.

The first thing that I wanted to point out is the relationship between the colors. Starting in the book of Exodus, the nation of Israel was called to weave together three colors of thread for the construction of this holy edifice:

*“blue, purple, and scarlet thread, fine linen, and goats’ hair...”*  
-Exodus 25:4

But why these three colors? I think this article by Rabbi Irwin sums up the main points quite well:

*“Immediately after listing the metals to be brought, the parashah lists the colored yarns: “blue, purple, and crimson” (Exodus 25:4). Much of the commentary on these colors describes either their derivation or the meaning of the individual color’s shading. For example, Rabbi Meir (second century) connects blue to the sea, sky, and “heavenly throne” (Babylonian Talmud, M’nachot 43b). Also commenting on Exodus 25:4, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (twelfth century) sees crimson as a reminder of how sin can be forgiven (alluded to by Isaiah 1:18). And in ancient days, purple as well as crimson, was a sign of nobility, no doubt because of how expensive the dye was to produce (see Lamentations 4:5 and Benno Jacob, Exodus [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1992], p. 766).*

*Few, however, comment on the relationship of the colors to one another or why these three specific colors were to be used. The Torah: A Women’s Commentary (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss [New York: URJ Press, 2008], p. 453) states, “These three colors are probably listed in order of costliness,” an echo of the listing of precious metals, although no source is given for this assumption.*

*I would suggest that the colors have two levels of meaning, both implying the need for separation and unity: The colors allude to the masculine and feminine aspects. Red is often associated with women. The color of blood, it is naturally connected with a woman’s cycle. Blue, the color of the single string of the tallit, was traditionally worn only by men. And purple? It is the mixture of the two together—a reminder that it is not only the unique ways we seek God, but also what we share in our search that is important.*

*These colors relate to the Divine, the human, and the covenantal bond between them. As indicated above, blue is often associated in Jewish sources with God. The color of the sea and sky, it is a reminder of the grandeur and spaciousness of the universe. Red ( *adom* ) is connected to the earth ( *adamah* ) to which we as humans ( *b’nei adam* ) are inextricably rooted. And purple? Again, it’s emblematic of where God and we “meet.”*

*-Rabbi Irwin A. Zeplowitz - “The Color Purple and Blue and Red”*

As he mentions above, the color red is usually associated with the feminine, and blue is usually associated with the masculine; and when these come together, we get purple. So it is significant that the ideal woman is clothing her family in red, meaning she is covering her family with herself. Giving sacrificially of her own effort and passion to ensure the warmth and care of her own family. But she clothes herself in purple as a sign that she is seeking to be a source of unity and harmony within the family. Both harmony with her husband, and a harmony with God Himself. Now let's go through some of the main, specific, points that this scarlet color represents.

## Wealth and Sacrifice

*“And when you are plundered, What will you do? Though you clothe yourself with crimson, Though you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, Though you enlarge your eyes with paint, In vain you will make yourself fair; Your lovers will despise you; They will seek your life.”*

*-Jeremiah 4:30*

While it is relatively well-known that the color purple was a sign of luxury and wealth in the ancient world, it is less well-known that scarlet had a similar meaning. The reason for both has to do with the difficulty in making the two dyes. Purple was usually made from a secretion from a snail, but crimson was made from crushing a specific type of bug. Due to the arduous process necessary for both dyes, they were costly, but the process for making scarlet dye infers something else, sacrifice.

This makes sense, the first “clothing” that a child will have is the womb of their mother. They are clothed in the “red” of their mother and therefore receive their first understanding of love from their mothers sacrifice. The symbol here is pretty clear, it's not that the virtuous woman can necessarily afford costly scarlet clothing for all her family, but that the virtuous wife makes sure that her family is “richly” clothed through her sacrificial love. It isn't just that she has made them clothes, but that these clothes have come from her hard work and devotion to her family. It is her *love* that produces the clothing and food for the family.

## Protection

*“And so it was, when she was giving birth, that the one put out his hand; and the midwife took a scarlet thread and bound it on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.”*

*-Genesis 38:28*

*“...unless, when we come into the land, you bind this line of scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you bring your father, your mother, your brothers, and all your father’s household to your own home.”*

*-Joshua 2:18*

From these two passages we can also see that scarlet thread had something to do with protection. In Genesis 38 a scarlet thread was used to “mark” the firstborn as they drew him out of his mother’s womb. Even though his brother came out first, this thread “guarded” his position as the firstborn. The second instance is more straightforward. In the book of Joshua, a prostitute named Rahab protected some Israeli spies. This courageous act moved the Israeli’s to protect her and her family when they invaded Jericho, and to mark her house she was asked to hang a scarlet cord from her window.

But why is this color associated with protection? Some of it has to do with its symbol of wealth and sacrifice, but also there was a bit of a superstition in the ancient world regarding this color. This is what the Pulpit Commentary tells us about this color:

*“For all her household are clothed with scarlet; with warm garments. The word used is שָׁנִים (shanim), derived from a verb meaning “to shine,” and denoting a crimson or deep scarlet colour. This colour was supposed, and rightly, to absorb and retain heat, as white to repel it; being made of wool, the garments would be warm as well as stately in appearance.”*

*-Joseph Exell - “The Pulpit Commentary”*

This is why the inhabitants of the house don’t fear the snow, they are protected by the clothing of their mother. On a practical level, it is usually the mother of the family who reminds her children to dress warmly, and the mother who ensures the safety and protection of her family. But this goes a little deeper than that. It is the mother’s sacrificial love that “warms” the home and gives grace and compassion to her husband. It is the mother’s affection that often warms the children to their father and cools the temper of the husband towards his children.

The mother produces harmony in the family and cares deeply for everyone in the home. This is why when the role of the mother is absent, or sometimes subverted through her vanity or selfishness, the home becomes a cold and callous place. Consider the following Proverb:

*“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, Than a fatted calf with hatred.”*

*Proverbs 15:17*

This is the maternal role in the home, to “cover” it in love and ensure grace and compassion. As a simple juxtaposition think about the story of Hansel and Gretel, where the mother doesn’t love the children and sends them out to starve, and the story of Little Red Riding Hood where she is clothed in scarlet by her mother in order to follow the path to her grandmother's house, the grandmother’s house could be symbol for her journey told a rich older life, or an adherence to the traditions of her ancestors.

In both stories the children are delivered from a terrible fate, but in one story it is in spite of the evils of their mother and the children have to save themselves, in the other story the masculine woodcutter saves Red Riding Hood and the grandmother in accordance with the mother’s love and direction. In fact, the reason why Red Riding Hood is put in danger is because she ignores the direction of her mother to stay on the path and instead falls prey, literally, to the wiles of the predatory wolf.

It is the love of our mothers that provides us with the safety necessary to explore our own dreams and orient ourselves properly towards our own good. Without this “covering” it is difficult to see the world as a place to explore, and instead it can be a place filled with darkness and desolation, where even the most harmless looking homes are filled with malicious intentions and violent desires. This is how the author Martin Shaw describes the symbolism of red in stories:

*“The Red is to do with life force, power, survival, grandeur, ego. If you are lucky it comes online somewhere in childhood and you have it readily available as a kind of fuel. It’s the Red that urges you on, gives you the courage to take a position, draw a line in the sand. It’s the Red that lets you dream big, pack a suitcase, and head out on an adventure. Someone in the Red is not crippled with self-doubt but can act decisively in their ambition to get ahead.”*

*-Martin Shaw - “Liturgies of the Wild”*

Christians have this same type of covering, which is why we literally drink the “red” of our Savior in our time communing with Him. In the same pattern of a mother, Christ offered His blood to clothe His children. It is His blood that washes away our sins, that makes us clean and able to approach the throne of God. It is for this reason that we experience safety and joy in His presence. Just like a mother’s love, the love of God is unearned and sacrificial in the highest regard. This safety gives us peace and calls us to praise and enjoy Him more.

*“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect*

*love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.”*

*-1 John 4:17-19*