

My name is Kevin Sneed, and I am a Pastoral Resident here at CPC working with our Young Adult's ministry. The reality of a day like Mother's Day is that it is a day filled with all sorts of tension and emotions. We recognize that for many women Mother's Day can carry a lot of pain also. Maybe it is the first Mother's Day since your mom has passed. Maybe your relationship with your mom is broken. Or maybe you desperately want to be a mom, but for whatever reason, you are unable to. We just want you to know that we see and recognize your pain.

Re-Defining "The Proverbs 31 Woman"

One of the phrases I have learned to continually keep in the forefront of my mind, specifically as I study the scriptures is "familiarity breeds unfamiliarity." Having grown up in the church myself, there is a creeping tendency to approach the scriptures with a low-grade arrogance, assuming I have it all figured out. But the reality is this familiarity develops unfamiliarity. All of us have stories, passages, etc., which over the years we have heard (whether we grew up in church or not), that we often gloss over because we assume we have heard all the story has to offer.

If we understand familiarity breeds unfamiliarity, then we must constantly remind ourselves to approach the scriptures with a greater sense of curiosity because we recognize the familiar stories have far more to offer than what we can recall. A day like Mother's Day and the texts generally taught on Mother's Day, easily fall into this familiarity breeding unfamiliarity trap. Wanting to avoid that and the many traps associated with a male preaching on a day like Mother's Day, I wanted to seek input from women about what they would and wouldn't want to hear preached.

An interesting thing began to happen. Almost all of the women I spoke with mentioned they had a painful relationship with the predominant text taught on Mother's Day. Here is the text they mentioned...

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. (Proverbs 31:10)

It is arguably the text most associated with femininity. It describes a woman who appears to be a sort of "super-heroine of domesticity." They read about her making clothes, prepping food, keeping the house in order, etc. A surface level reading of the text, for the women I asked and many other women, becomes just another impossible standard by which they mark their shortcomings. Put simply; the passage comes with some baggage.

I have always heard this text preached and taught one way. So I began to wonder if this was another case of familiarity breeding unfamiliarity. In what ways have we read our own culture into the

text, and failed to allow the text to carry its own interpretive weight. This is the reason, I believe, we need to re-examine this simple text because I hope to offer a subtle turning of our interpretive focus on this text to shed new light on its meaning and implications for us today. What I found is this text is incredibly inspiring for women and men alike.

As I consider this particular cultural moment, with courageous women speaking out more and more about the ways power has been abused to suppress women, there is no better or fitting verse and the subsequent examples we will look at than what we just read. Let me explain, but first a bit of context.

Proverbs 31 is the final chapter of the book of Proverbs. And the book of Proverbs is classified in the "wisdom literature" genre of the Bible. Throughout the entire book, wisdom is personified as a woman. So when we get to the final chapter of the book, and it speaks of a "woman," we can certainly understand this woman to be the embodiment of the "wisdom" spoken of in the prior 30 plus chapters. Although there is certainly nothing wrong with the surface image of the woman portrayed in this poem, to reduce its interpretation to a prescriptive list of the totality of the woman's role, is to minimize the intent of the text and miss the greater meaning.

The primary problem in the way we approach Proverbs 31 is we use it as a way of reducing womanhood to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. But in reality, the primary thrust of the text is about character that transcends both gender and circumstance.

Eshet Chayil—Woman of Valor

Let me show you what I mean. To do so, I want to return our attention toward the verse we just read.

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. (Proverbs 31:10)

The phrase "wife [or woman] of noble character" is a fascinating phrase. In Hebrew, the phrase is *eshet chayil*. *Eshet* is the word for woman or wife. *Chayil* can be translated as worthy, of virtue, capable, excellent, etc. But the most common appearance of this word is that of army. The word occurs 224 times in the Old Testament, and its occupancies are as follows:

- Army (86)
- Valiant/Valor (63)
- Wealth/Riches (25)
- Forces (12)
- Other misc. (38) (Excellence, noble, worthy, able, etc.)

The word carries a connotation of strength, usually when speaking of a force of power. It is used to speak of:

- Joshua's mighty men who invaded Canaan.
- Pharaoh's army that chased after the Israelites.
- Throughout Judges, it was used to describe armies and warriors.
- In 2nd Samuel as God as the "Strong fortress."
- And all throughout the Psalms, it described the works and power of God.

What is fascinating is the traditional translation of this text here in Proverbs 31 is:

ESV "excellent wife..."

KJV "virtuous woman..."

NIV "wife of noble character..."

NLT "virtuous and capable wife..."

You get the point. In a very real sense, in the context of women, we have domesticated this word to speak of "ability" or "noble character." I would argue, with a fairly strong case, that a better translation is "a woman of valor, who can find?" In a Jewish context, this phrase is a sort of rallying cry around successes and affirmations of women. In Proverbs 31, the woman is described as a valiant woman, filled with courage, strength, power, ability, she is described as a force.

Chayil carries a notion of power, strength, fortitude. It is a militaristic word that exudes strength and power and is fundamentally used to speak of warriors and armies. And this language sets the tone for the entire poem. The poem is not about a sort of to-do list, but rather is about a posture in which we see the world—a character trait to embody.

Eshet Chayil is not about specific roles but is about a way of life. It is about a character of courage, strength, and influence. It is about approaching your work, whatever that may be, an engineer, stay-at-home Mom/Dad, software designer, or teacher—whatever your vocation, it is a call to approach it with courage, strength, valor.

Ruth as Exemplar—The Other Woman of Valor

All throughout the scriptures, you see women who exemplify this role. What is interesting is in the original construction of the Hebrew Bible the book, which immediately follows Proverbs was the book of Ruth. Meaning, you would finish reading Proverbs 31, and immediately start the story of Ruth, who embodies this concept of valor. In fact, only once outside the book of Proverbs is this particular phrase used and that is to describe Ruth. Check it out here in Ruth 3:11.

And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character." (Ruth 3:11)

Ruth is a fascinating character and her being issued this title of "*eshet chayil*" is an interesting choice. Circumstantially her life looked nothing like what we see depicted in Proverbs 31. So how did Ruth get to the place where she was bestowed this description? As we look briefly at her story, we will certainly discover her a fitting exemplary, demonstrating traits in Ruth that exemplify what it means to live as a woman of valor. Because I believe Ruth embodies this concept of valor, which is inspiring for both women and men, what I want to do is simply allow the story of Ruth teach us what it means to walk this life with valor.

Chapter 1—Love Beyond Comfort

The story opens with an Israelite family of four moving from Bethlehem to Moab to escape a famine. Upon arrival, the father dies, and the two sons marry Moabite women. However, tragedy strikes again, and the two sons die. This leaves Naomi (mother), Orpah (daughter-in-law), and Ruth (daughter-in-law) all widowed, and are left with no hope for a future in Moab. Remember, this is a patriarchal society. Women are considered little more than property and are utterly dependent on the men in their life for their livelihood.

Left widowed in a foreign land, Naomi decides the best plan of action is to return to Bethlehem, her homeland, with her daughter-in-law's and try to reestablish themselves amongst family. However, along the way, Naomi recognizing how difficult life in a foreign land was going to be for her two widowed daughters-in-law. She had a change of heart and urged Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab (their homeland). This was not only an act of tremendous mercy from Naomi but also was a release from their marital obligations to remain with their deceased husband's family. Marriage in this culture centered more around a forever bond, not simply between individuals but between families. So you were connected forever not only to your spouse but to your spouse's family.

So the offer from Naomi was a release from obligation, an offer for her daughters-in-law to recreate a new identity. Naomi offered for them both to leave. Then we see a very emotional scene, as can be imagined. These three women have been through unthinkable tragedy.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!"

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." (Ruth 1:8–15)

Orpah takes Naomi up on the offer and returns to Moab. But Ruth refuses the offer. Listen to Ruth's response to Naomi.

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will

be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely if even death separates you and me.
(Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth commits herself to Naomi for the rest of her days but does so in a manner of placing Naomi's good above her own.

- You go—I go
- You lodge—I lodge
- Your people—my people
- Your God—my God
- You die—I die

Ruth is binding her life with Naomi. Ruth will follow Naomi wherever she goes and whatever she does. It is a form of unconditional love and commitment to the other. The decision is wrought with uncertainty and potential disaster. Ruth is fully aware of the difficult life that is on the horizon for her as a foreigner from an enemy country living in Israel. Without question, it is a courageous decision. It is also the moment on which the entire narrative of the book of Ruth hangs.

Consider the physical space they find themselves in. They are in the middle of a journey to Bethlehem, between Moab and Judah, they are outside of their cultural confines, and outside of all the traditional identity markers for both women. It is a physical picture of desolation and a spiritual picture of desolation. But Ruth, in that space of desperation, when she had every right and opportunity to walk away, refused to take the easy path and committed to Naomi to loyally restore a family that had been decimated by death.

Ruth's courageous vow embodies valor. Her words form a new reality, a new family, and a new identity. Her words have the power to create a new thing, and that is exactly what they do. For Naomi, it was an act, which would preserve and promote her life. It was an act of loving-kindness, steadfast love, grace, and goodness. For Ruth, it was a refusal to allow the desperation of Naomi to be the end of her story. It was the decision to place the good of Naomi above her own well-being. A woman of valor loves beyond comfort. *Eshet Chayil* is a call to place the good of others above ourselves.

Chapter 2—Faithfulness in Uncertainty

The story continues...Although Naomi's late husband had family in Bethlehem, no one came forward to help the two women. Ruth took the initiative to save them from starvation. Worried about where their next meal would come from, Ruth got food by gleaning in the fields and ended up in a field owned by a man named Boaz, who just so happened to be a wealthy relative of Naomi's late husband. Not only is Boaz a kinsman—a family member—but he is also prominent, rich, and influential.

Boaz is interested in who Ruth is, Ruth 2:5–7 states,

“Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, ‘Who does that young woman belong to?’ The overseer replied, ‘She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

(Ruth 2:5–7)

Boaz's question is that of identity. One's identity, particularly that of a woman, is tied to kin. Identity is family, kinship, and land. And Ruth is impoverished in all of these areas. At this point in her life, she has lost her husband, she is a foreigner in a foreign land, and is without the societal safety nets to secure her future. This is a moment of tension. The response from the servant to Boaz speaks into this tension; it highlights her “otherness” in a way that signifies to Boaz her isolation. ***“She is a Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi.”***

But the response also evokes the character of this Woman of Valor. The comments about her work in the field signify the strength and determination of Ruth. It is a picture of physical and emotional strength. She has abandoned all that she has known, her land, her religion, and her family, and this has left her with her character. Her ability to work vigorously for the sake of her own well being.

Boaz was so impressed with Ruth's commitment to Naomi that he offered a response, which is nothing short of performative and reality creating for Ruth. Chapter 2:8 it reads,

“My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me.”

My daughter, he said. This language carries a tone of belonging. It is a term of endearment, the language of family. It is Boaz invoking the language of belonging, “you are mine, and I am yours.” It is Ruth's faithfulness in the midst of the uncertainty that strikes Boaz. What is fascinating about the narrative of Ruth is the agent of change in the story is a Moabite and a Moabite widow at that. She would generally be regarded as the spoiler, the baggage, the burden, or the other. But this outsider was the agent for change in both Boaz and Naomi, the link between the two. And at the center of that is the faithfulness of an outsider. She is the one who will bring about new life to Naomi. Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi allows her to demonstrate the faithfulness of God to a people who are barren. Women of valor demonstrate faithfulness in the midst of uncertain times.

Chapter 3—Subversive Initiative

The harvest ended, and still, no one came to their aid. Concerned, Naomi hatched a plan and instructed Ruth to go to Boaz privately in the dead of night to help him recognize their situation. Naomi's plan was to have Ruth stop wearing clothes of a grieving widow, and dress in her best clothes. After the meal, Ruth is to uncover Boaz's feet and lie down when he goes to sleep. Then, she said, Boaz would do the rest. Ruth obliged, saying she would do whatever Naomi said. Ruth did as she was instructed, to a point. She went to Boaz, laid at his feet and then Ruth goes against the plan, taking the initiative to ensure the safety of her and Naomi. She said,

“I am your servant Ruth. Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” (Ruth 3:9)

This is an incredibly bold move by Ruth. She laid at Boaz's feet and then looked directly at this powerful man and instructed him on

what to do, *“spread the corner of your garment over me...”* This “spreading of the garment” was a cultural symbol for a proposal. It represented the man spreading his protection over the woman. In a patriarchal culture in which arranged marriage was the default understanding, Ruth proposed to Boaz, a radical departure from cultural norms. For a few reasons, this was a risky move. First, for a woman on the underside of every cultural power, she risked rejection, rape, and abuse with no protection and no recourse. She was quite literally entrusting her life to Boaz for the sake of protecting her and Naomi’s future well being.

Secondly, she was subverting cultural norms in an outrageous act of defiance. With no male relative to offer protection or even to negotiate the terms of marriage, she was without the covering of a family. Again Ruth exposed herself in incredible vulnerability. Woman of valor love in risky and creative ways. *Eshet Chayil* is a call to pour one’s life out for the sake of the other.

Boaz’s response was startling and highlights the subversive nature of Ruth’s act.

“The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask...” (Ruth 3:10–11a)

Boaz was so impressed with Ruth’s initiative and courage and was particularly impressed because Ruth passes on other more attractive options. At any point, having been released by Naomi of her marital obligation, Ruth could have married someone else on her own and secured her future. According to Boaz, Ruth could have married some of the younger men in the town or those who were rich or poor. Essentially Boaz was highlighting Ruth laid down her preference for the sake of family loyalty. It was an act, even in our day, which would be considered incredibly subversive. She acted from neither passion nor greed, but rather, sacrificially set aside her personal preferences. She made her preference subservient to the greater act of love and loyalty to her family. And here we finally return to the concept of *“Eshet Chayil.”* Boaz continued,

“And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.” (Ruth 3:11)

After witnessing all of Ruth and Naomi’s struggles, Boaz bestowed on her the high title of *“Eshet Chayil.”* Circumstantially, in comparison to the women in Proverbs 31, Ruth’s life looked nothing the

same. Ruth didn’t spend her days making clothes for her husband; she had no husband, she was widowed. Ruth’s children didn’t rise up and call her blessed. She was childless. Ruth didn’t spend her days exchanging with merchants or keeping her home immaculate. She was a day laborer, working in the fields, gleaning the leftovers from other’s work. But Boaz saw in her the valor worthy of such a title. And here is how we understand the broader definition of *“eshet chayil.”* Ruth was bestowed this title before she got married before she had a child before she became wealthy and influential.

Ruth was identified as a woman of valor not because of what she did, but because of her character, because she lived her life with bravery, initiative, risky love, and faithfulness. It is not our roles that define us, but the content of our character. This is demonstrated throughout the scriptures by such women as Sarah, Esther, Mary Magdalene, Martha, Julia, Priscilla, Phoebe, Rahab, and etc.

It is the example of these women, and so many women sitting in this congregation now, which offers a perspective on what it means to live the calling of God on our lives with valor. It is the example of women bringing their gifts, insights, passions, and callings to create hope and healing in this world. Because the point is this. We, all of us, men and women, are called to live a life of valor, a life of *chayil*. And so may you follow the stunning example of Ruth. May you, like Ruth, love beyond comfort. May you, like Ruth demonstrate faithfulness and resolve for others in the midst of uncertain times. May you, like Ruth pour your life out for the sake of others. And may you do your thing, whatever that may be, with valor. If it is pursuing a career, do it with valor. If it is software engineering, do it with valor. If it is chasing a two-year-old around all day, do it with valor. If it is fighting human trafficking, do it with valor. Take risks, love beyond comfort, demonstrate faithfulness and resolve for others in the midst of uncertain times, pour your life out for the sake of others, and walk with valor and faith in a God who is with you in the midst of the ordinary. Ultimately, may you and I come to have the fraction of courage of so many of the women and sisters in our lives, who lead us in courage, valor, and faith!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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