

Women's Ministry: Past, Present, Future

Women's Ministry of the Past:

In ancient times, the role of women in ministry looked vastly different from what you would see today in the local church. There was not a formal ministry program, Saturday morning brunches, prayer circles and craft projects. Yet, it was an active and vibrant ministry, that was part of the everyday. It becomes more evident as we begin to expose what ministry of women looked like in Old Testament.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth, the sky and the land, the sun, moon and stars. He created plants, animals, fish and he created man. He named him Adam. Noting that man should not be alone, God created woman from Adam's rib. He named her Eve.

This was the first embodiment of Old Testament Women's Ministry: WIFE

Fundamentals of any ministry are:

- 1) Ministry as the goal of promoting the gospel.
- 2) Ministry is a servants position, as we serve those God has called us to.
- 3) Ministry is relational, building relationships between those we serve & Christ.

God didn't look at Adam and think he needed another being to dominate. He recognized that it was not good for man to be ALONE. God created a relationship for Adam with another human being. Eve was created to minister to Adam's loneliness.

God then commanded Adam and Eve to go forth and multiply, filling the nations to the ends of the Earth.

This was the second embodiment of Old Testament Women's Ministry: MOTHER

Eve was given a special gift, she could bear children. God could have created the great heroes of the Bible, just as he did Adam. But Eve, women, were giving a special calling to minister through the birthing and raising of godly children. And even if you do not have children of your own, you are still an integral part of influencing and shaping children and the young adults that will enter your life.

Our primary ministry, as women, was outlined by God in the book of Genesis. We are a gift to our husbands, we are gifting the world children who know and love God. In both these ways we honor God, and through having children we are equipping the Great Commission.

We can't neglect that not all women in the Old Testament, and not all women today, have a spouse or children. This too is a gift of God, that we can embrace, because we know that God has chosen a different calling on our lives. Just as we established in the last topic, God will detour from those established roles when He has cause to do so.

However, if you are a woman who is married, who does have children, it is important to recognize that this is your first ministry priority. Established in the Old Testament, and just as important today.

In their role within the household, women would also minister to their slaves, maids, and women within their community. They took food to the poor, cared for the sick. They would adopt orphaned children as their own. They looked not only to their affairs, but the affairs of others.

This was the third embodiment of Old Testament Women's Ministry: COMMUNITY

In the scriptures we learn that God called Miriam, Deborah and Huldah as prophetesses within their community, Deborah was even a judge over Israel. God bestowed spiritual gifts upon these women, they were respected and held with high regard in their community. They served God as message bearers, handling the direct word of God.

This was the fourth embodiment of Old Testament Women's Ministry: SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Additionally women of the Old Testament had other talents, they would make garments, perfumes, jewelry, fabric dyes, food and displayed hospitality toward others. These are talents are just as much gifts, like prophecy, because they would be used in ways that would glorify God. He was given the honor and the credit for these talents & gifts.

In the Old Testament, women certainly were not afforded the same liberties we have today. However they were still important in the ministry of the home and in the community. Often, women were the hands and feet, getting things done and caring for one another.

But what is also very interesting about the ministry of Old Testament women, is that it was done alongside their husbands. In most cases, the men of the Old Testament were work at home husbands and fathers. They were directly involved in the comings and goings of their household, the training of their children in regard to faith, social skills, and occupation. Men were the primary spiritual leaders in their homes, men were the priests leading the community. This is very different from what we see in most homes today, where the husband is gone to work the majority of the waking hours, and mom has taken over the responsibility of the daily rearing of children, particularly in their spiritual life.

In preparing for this course, I was intrigued at how most books and articles point toward the New Testament Church as the foundation of Women's Ministry. However, the further you dig into the Old Testament scriptures, the more evident it becomes that Women's Ministry is not a new idea. It is simply an evolving one, that has changed over the years as the role of the woman in the home, church and community has changed. It roots itself in the very foundations of creation.

Godly women are called to minister to other women, they are drawn to it, it happens naturally because that is how God created women to be.

Watermark Community Church published an article on the 5 Characteristics of a Godly Woman, and I was encouraged that each of the characteristics were supported by scripture in the Old Testament.

- She will seek God first. [1 Chronicles 16:8-12](#), [Psalm 9:10](#), [Psalm 27:1-5](#), [Psalm 34:10-14](#), [Psalm 40:16](#),
- She will speak faithfully. [Genesis 2:18](#), [Proverbs 27:5-6](#), [Proverbs 31:8-9](#), [Proverbs 31:26](#) [Psalms 19:14](#), [Proverbs 12:18](#), [Proverbs 13:3](#), [Proverbs 16:13](#), [Proverbs 20:15](#), [Proverbs 24:26](#)
- She will show true beauty. [Proverbs 31:30](#) , [1 Samuel 16:7](#), [Proverbs 11:22](#)
- She will stay humble. [Isaiah 66:2](#), [Psalm 141:5](#), [Proverbs 3:5-6](#), [Proverbs 12:1](#), [Micah 6:8](#),
- She will serve the Lord. [Psalm 16:11](#), [Psalm 84:10-12](#),

Even though some of these scriptures were not attributed to a woman directly, as you will recall from our previous topic... before all things, even our gender, we are children of God. A godly woman is going to display the same characteristics as a godly man, perhaps in a different manner, or to a different

group or for a different purpose.

Probably the best example of Women's Ministry in the Old Testament is the scripture of the Noble Woman, or Noble Wife... the Proverbs 31 Woman.

In my personal experience, I have known women who LOVE the Proverbs 31 woman & strive to be her. I also know of women who don't like her at all, and feel a failure in comparison. Before I dive into how the Proverbs 31 Woman is an example of Women's Ministry, I'd like to unpack some facts about this scripture. I firmly believe those who have a hard time with this scripture simply misunderstand it.

When I first encountered the Proverbs 31 Woman, I was a newly wed. I came from a divorced family, my mother was single the majority of my life. My maternal grandfather, and paternal grandmother had both died before I was born. I truly didn't have an example of what marriage was like, let alone a godly, Christ centered, marriage. I turned to the scriptures to learn what a godly wife looked like, and there I met her.... the infamous Proverbs 31 Woman.

I also happen to be what is called an A type personality. I like order, checklists and clear instructions, I latched on to the Proverbs 31 scriptures as a life line. It was as if God had handed me an instruction booklet, and I just had to follow the rules. Easy, right?

Wrong. I failed, miserably. The more I tried to be like her, the more I failed. The more I failed, the more discouraged I became. The more discouraged I became, the less I wanted to try. It seemed impossible. And, in 16 years of Women's Ministry, I am not alone. A few years later, I opted to give the Proverbs 31 woman another chance, when I was invited to a bible study on the subject.

I looked to this as an opportunity to glean from wiser women, maybe the reason I was failing miserably at attaining this noble wife status was because I needed someone to show me the way. Reality was that I would end up in a room full of women just like me. Whether they were seasoned wives or newlyweds, we are all intimidated by this icon of biblical womanhood. The bible study would flip everything I thought I knew about the Proverbs 31 woman upside.

The scriptures of Proverbs 31 woman are an acrostic poem, which means that each line of the poem started with a letter of the hebrew alphabet. Historically, Jewish women would recite this in the evening at dinner time. It served as a reminder of the woman they were to become, and a reminder to their husband to appreciate the wife they have been blessed with. While there is some debate as to whether or not this woman actually existed or it was being presented as the "ideal woman", the value is still significant to women entering into ministry.

It was also written as a chiasmic poem, which basically means it was written in an hour glass shape. Longer lines at the start, diminishing in size toward the middle, and then increasing in size toward the end. "A poem with a chiasmic structure uses parallel lines that have corresponding themes. These parallels are not one after the other; instead, the top line and the bottom line are parallel, then the second line and the next to last line are parallel, and so on. The very middle line is the *emphasis*, the main focus of the poem." (Jessica Duncan, Lake Hills Community Church).

The emphasis or focus of the poem is verse 23: "Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land." John MacArthur explains it like this: "...*he is esteemed and respected by his peers, in part because she created a world for him in which he could be everything God wanted*

him to be” (Different By Design, page 77).

This is important, because remember we have already established that the first embodiment of Women's Ministry was established in the creation story of Genesis; Eve's role as Adam's helpmeet. As we continue to unpack the rest of the scripture, we see the other embodiments of Old Testament Women's Ministry are there too!

Her ministry to her husband:

P31v11: Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.

P31v12: She brings him good not harm, all the days of her life.

P31v23: Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

Her ministry to her children:

P31v14: She is like the merchant ships bringing her food from afar.

P31v15: She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions to her servant.

P31v21: When it snows she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

P31v27: She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

P31v28: Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also and he praises her.

Her ministry to the community:

P31v20: She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy

P31v24: She makes linen garments and sells them. She supplies the merchants with sashes.

P31v31: Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Her ministry with her gifts:

P31v13: She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.

P31v16: She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

P31v17: She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

P31v22: She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

P31v26: She speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

Charm is deceiving, beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is worthy to be praised.
(P31v30)

If we look at the scripture, not as a long check list of all the things we should be doing, but instead view it as an example of how this woman ministered to her family and community.... the task looks less daunting. We don't have to BE her twin, but we can inspire to minister like she did. The tasks that our husbands entrust us to may be different, our children may have different needs, our interests in community service may vary, and God has given us all any number of gifts.... but the call to ministry is the same.

Old Testament Women's Ministry set the foundation for what the New Testament Women's Ministry would become.

In the early church of the New Testament, we can recognize that the four areas of ministry (wife, mother, community, and gifts) are still the foundations of a godly woman. When Jesus enters the scene, women's ministry begins to grow. We already discussed significant New Testament women previously, in the course. I want to explore a little more about their particular ministry role.

New Testament Women are FINANCIAL BENEFACTORS to the ministry, like Joanna.

** Proverbs 31:16 She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.*

There were New Testament women who were gifted with sound judgment when it came to money and investment. As good stewards of this blessing, they used their earnings to help further Jesus' ministry during his lifetime and after.

New Testament Women are direct STUDENTS under Jesus himself, like Mary of Bethany.

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

In order to instruct faithfully, the Proverbs 31 woman would need knowledge of the Lord. Whether she listened to the prophets and priests, or her husband's instruction; she was a faithful student of the Lord. New Testament women had the blessing of hearing the words directly from Christ, or those who learned from him. They were faithful students, eager to hear and learn.

New Testament Women are LEADERS of home churches, like Phoebe.

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

In the New Testament church, serving the poor and tending to the ill were very relevant to the ministry of women. God created us as compassionate nurturers. When the churches began to spring up in the cities, they were often held in homes. Many women opened their doors, welcoming in the poor in spirit, those in need of Christ. They cared for these people not just physically, but spiritually. Some did this along with their husbands, but many widows were known for opening their home to the local church & serving it's people faithfully.

New Testament Women were on a MISSION, like Priscilla, The Great Commission.

** Proverbs 31:14 She is like the merchant ships bringing her food from afar.*

The Proverbs 31 woman was well known and respected around town, she would travel far distances to get the things she needed. Her reputation would most certainly follow her. In the New Testament, there were many women who were well known, respected and when they traveled they were doing so with the purpose of sharing the gospel.

To recap:

4 Old Testament Women's Ministry Roles

- Wife
- Mother
- Community
- Spiritual Gifts

4 Additional Ministry Roles within the New Testament

- Financial Benefactors
- Students
- Leaders
- Missionaries

As we moved further forward in time, to our recent past, Women's Ministry would have an entirely different look. Our culture had changed. The men had left the home to work in corporate business offices and factories, women were tending to the home from the inside, there was no more gathering at the well to gather water and talk amongst your friends and neighbors. Life became more scheduled, and distractions would begin to invade and erode “community” as the world became more modernized.

With these changes in culture, Women's Ministry made a major shift, and it became more formalized. It was a program within the church, that provided a mixture of bible study and socialization that the women had neglected. God created us as relational beings, and we were holing ourselves up in our houses or heading off to work ourselves.

Women's Ministry changed to answer that void. The new formalized program would help us tap into those 8 roles of ministry we discovered in the Old and New Testament, but it wasn't a part of our daily life, like it once was. It wrapped itself up in centerpieces and luncheons, fundraisers became an opportunity to dress up and raise money to help orphans or the poor in other countries. If left unchecked, Women's Ministry would become more of a social club and less Christ focused.

This is not to say that there weren't people doing Women's Ministry right! We still had women volunteering for missions, and ladies auxiliary groups that would make blankets for the homeless during the winter. We had women leading bible studies and helping to pave the way for amazing revivals.

To understand where Women's Ministry is going in the future, we have to understand what we are currently doing right... and wrong.