



CHAPTER 1

WHY WISDOM? WHY BUSINESS?

[Solomon] composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. . . . People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

—1 Kings 4:32–34

Nothing compares to wisdom. Those who find it gain understanding and value far more profitable than silver and gold, more precious than rubies.¹ Where can wisdom be found? As I have pursued wisdom over the past decades, I have found it in expected and unexpected places: among friends and family as I navigated changing career and seasons of life as well as in the marketplace and in the day-to-day transactions of business.

Throughout my business career, I have served as a US Army soldier, a global supply chain manager, and a supply chain professor. In each role, I sought wisdom. I found wisdom in the advice of commanding officers as I started out in psychological operations (PSYOPS). When I moved from PSYOPS to ordnance (Army explosives supply), wisdom was there in the help of a sergeant first class. I ultimately landed in public affairs as a broadcast journalist with a full scholarship to pursue my MBA. I found wisdom in the counsel of many as I shifted to civilian work as an operations manager overseeing the global supply chain of polypropylene (plastic) packaging for a packaging importer. With wisdom as my friend, I engaged people all over the world. My network grew to span Guatemala, India, and China with manufacturing customers including PepsiCo and ADM in the US. After the completion of my MBA,

1. Job 28:12; Proverbs 3:13–15; 8:10–11.



I spent a few restless years working in packaging imports before I shifted my focus to higher education.

Amidst the splendor of fall, my family uprooted from our home in the Chicago suburbs and moved to the beautiful mountains of Tennessee. With the aim to gain skills, business knowledge, and wisdom, I began my PhD in business at the University of Tennessee specializing in logistics and marketing. My husband transitioned his career to Knoxville, Tennessee, and my two children, at that time ten months and four years old, quickly adjusted to being southerners.

In the PhD program, I immediately found myself working on contract research for the Department of Defense and partnering with Fortune 500 companies to discover the best practices for sustainable supply chain management. Not previously an environmentalist or particularly knowledgeable about social and environmental practices, I was on the fast lane to learning all I could about the profitable applications of sustainable management. I learned quickly that this involved the flow of products from raw material to the end customer while reducing pollution, empowering people from farm to retail, and pursuing a net positive impact for profitability, people, and the planet. I sat with business leaders as they discussed the importance of environmental initiatives for corporate cost savings and to meet customer requirements. Across these conversations, I glimpsed care for the customer, employee, and supplier (people), and care for the environment (creation).

We explored how these leading companies were navigating cutting-edge lean strategies in partnership with environmental initiatives. Initially, the Toyota production system employed lean strategies to increase efficiency and reduce waste. Toyota created a leaner supply chain while creating better employee engagement, more selective supplier networks, and an environment of continuous improvement. Lean strategies implemented by Toyota uniquely empowered employees to create solutions on the assembly line and to highlight bottlenecks immediately (this was *not* a standard practice in the assembly lines of Ford, GM, and Chrysler).

To add to the green and lean strategies, all of these organizations were operating in a global economy with suppliers and customers all over the world. We talked with dozens of manufacturing, retail, and logistics companies, including global giants like John Deere, Walmart, and FedEx. Many of these companies globalized their supply chains in search of low-cost sourcing. Low-cost, global sources prove to be a challenge to many companies as they pursue high-quality products and leaner, lower inventory levels with long supply chains.

The cutting-edge strategies² we identified through this work reflected concepts I comfortably categorized as biblical stewardship. It struck me that it was wise to produce quality products with an awareness of the resources necessary to move those products to market, from raw material to finished good. Both natural resources and people are necessary to sustain the creation and growth of a profitable product in the marketplace. I spent the next year working closely with one of the largest railroad providers in North America as I collected and analyzed data to complete my first-year research project. I found many of the same themes. These were all “secular” organizations. I didn’t have any evidence that the founders were Christian or that the current leaders had any kind of religious inclination. However, the principles of honoring people and caring for creation rang as biblical to me.

It was at this time in my PhD research that I turned to Christian books and teaching, but I couldn’t find a framework that reflected a biblical model of conducting business. Pastors seemed to focus on virtue: be a good person, preach the gospel, invite people to church, and tithe. After all, successful business leaders can use their resources to sow into the church through tithes and offerings or develop kingdom-related, nonprofit enterprises. But there was no model for how to conduct business. I found loads of virtue ethics (who you should be) but no consequence ethics (how to weigh the results of your actions). How does Scripture influence our decisions beyond personal piety? I had learned through the green, lean, and global study that most decisions in business have an impact on someone, somewhere. There are consequences to our actions every day in work, not just in our acts of service in the church. As I reflected on the science—science that indicates that treating people well and taking care of God’s creation boosts profitability—a specific passage of Scripture persisted in my study throughout the entire first year of my PhD program.

A few months before embarking on my PhD journey, on a winter Saturday in the Chicago suburbs, I had a *gestalt*: a moment in which all the moving pieces in a great mystery I had been pondering started to come together, a moment that guided my thinking for years to follow. That day, my pastor in Chicago hosted a Bible study. The speaker was an international guest, the wife of a gentleman who ran a church ministry training program in the UK. The topic of study for the day was “the Proverbs 31 wife.”

2. D. A. Mollenkopf, H. J. Stolze, W. Tate, and M. Ueltschy, “Green, Lean, and Global Supply Chains,” *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* 40, no. 1–2 (2010): 14–41.

We all sipped coffee as the guest speaker began, admitting that she struggled with this passage. She never felt like she added up to this elusive exemplar of a woman. Ladies jumped in with stories of husbands' expectations, marriage, child raising, and household chaos. Some talked about how they aspired to live up to this incredible woman's example. As I sat and listened, I started to feel dissatisfied with the conversation and the reading itself. The majority of the ladies in the room didn't grow flax, weren't making clothing, didn't have households full of servants, and their husbands didn't have citywide reputations because of their actions. The passage says nothing of traditional duties of an American housewife. The Proverbs 31 woman isn't cleaning or cooking (although she is providing meals), and the passage says nothing about her interaction with her children aside from their praise. The passage is an acrostic from A to Z (in the Hebrew alphabet). These twenty-one verses capture a woman who is leading a global company in ancient Israel to the benefit of everyone with whom she interacts.

PROVERBS 31:10-31

Aleph	10	A capable wife ³ who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
Beth	11	The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.
Gimel	12	She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
Daleth	13	She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.
Hey	14	She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from far away.
Waw	15	She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
Zayin	16	She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
Heth	17	She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong.
Teth	18	She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.
Yod	19	She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
Kaph	20	She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.

3. American Standard Version: a worthy woman; King James Version: a virtuous woman; New International Version; a wife of noble character; Septuagint Bible (Greek Translation to English): a virtuous woman; Orthodox Jewish Bible: a woman of valor.

Lamed	21	She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.
Mem	22	She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Nun	23	Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.
Samek	24	She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.
Ayin	25	Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
Pey	26	She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
Tsade	27	She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Koph	28	Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her:
Resh	29	“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”
Sin, Shin	30	Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Taw	31	Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Could this passage written 3,000 years ago really be promoting the Western ideal of a stay-at-home mom, a concept that has only existed since the industrial revolution? Her children are only mentioned once, her husband three times, and the entirety of the other verses are dedicated to her virtue and actions in industry. It seemed impossible that the Bible would actually talk about a woman engaged in business. Just in case, I informed my husband that I was more than happy to adopt all practices of the Proverbs 31:10–31 businesswoman—just as soon as I had servants and the capital to launch my textile company. In the meantime, I continued to study those verses to understand implications for the Christian life beyond household duties.

In 2012, I finished my PhD at the University of Tennessee and took a faculty position at Florida State University in Tallahassee. I continued my ten-year journey with this capable wife who fears the Lord, first exploring the passage as an analogy that applies to all believers, all seekers of wisdom. The next leg of my journey with the Proverbs 31 woman was about to unfold.

Into the World of Faith and Business Integration

In 2015, I transitioned to Wheaton College, a unique and providential place for me to land. As a Christian institution, its mission is to do all things for Christ and his kingdom—including business. For the first time, I found myself in an environment that didn't shy away from the integration of faith and business. In the business schools where I learned to think critically and do research, faith was viewed as subjective and unscientific. In the churches I had grown up in and served in over the years, the most positive view of business was that it was an opportunity to generate wealth to support kingdom work, primarily for those in "full-time ministry" like missions and pastoral work. However, business was viewed as a means to an end (to provide money *for* kingdom work) but not an end in and of itself (business *as* kingdom work). Wheaton offered me the opportunity to explore the practicality of integrating biblical understanding with business research. Actually, the school required it. To apply for tenure and promotion, each faculty member must write an integrative paper discussing the intersection of the Christian faith and their disciplinary field.

I felt confident in my ability to synthesize and discuss business research, theories, and ideas. I felt less confident in my knowledge of theological and biblical history as it pertained to business. It's a good thing I love studying the Bible! One year into my time at Wheaton, I began a master's program in biblical studies with some of the most amazing Bible and theology faculty I have ever encountered. My first year in the program covered the Old Testament, which, of course, includes the book of Proverbs. By that time, I had spent years studying Wisdom Literature and Proverbs, and this was my opportunity to test my ideas and learn, to glean new perspectives about wisdom. During that first year in the program, each time I was required to write an essay or paper, I tried to shoehorn an analysis of Proverbs 31 into the assignment. I learned that Proverbs was part of a larger body of literature—the biblical books of wisdom and the ancient Near East wisdom/court literature. I had approached the passage of Proverbs 31:10–31 naively in the past without enough historical and cultural context for the genre of literature it represents. This book captures what I learned.

Biblical Case for Wisdom

Rewind 3,000 years. Solomon was on the throne of Israel in the wake of losing his father. Responsible for the spiritual, social, and economic welfare of