



Catalog No. 1649

I Samuel 25

2nd Message

Brian Morgan

May 8, 2011

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

SERIES: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

We are in the second of a nine-week series examining one of the qualities that made David a "man after God's own heart," which is how he responds when he is confronted by his sin. Last week in 1 Samuel 24, David was tempted to take Saul's life, but his "heart smote him" and he repented and trusted the Lord to vindicate him. But now in chapter 25, when he is shunned and spurned by a "fool," David's rage blinds him to his sin and he comes very close to taking things into his own hands with a potentially violent and bloody result. The question our text raises today is,

What does God do when the king loses his moral compass and there is no prophet?

The answer is that he sends a woman to intervene and set things right. The text is a masterpiece of composition. In Hebrew it is exactly 144 lines long (12 x 12 suggests reshaping a mob of angry men into a holy nation) in 44 verses and is put together in almost perfect symmetry. The structure gives us hope, suggesting how God works through insightful and courageous women to bring redemption out of abusive situations. Through Abigail, what began by looking like a war, turns out to be wedding.

I. A Crisis Created (1 Sam 25:1-13)

A. The setting: Unequally yoked (vv. 1-3)

Now Samuel died. And all Israel assembled and mourned for him, and they buried him in his house at Ramah. Then David rose and went down to the wilderness of Paran. And there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel. Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved; he was a Calebite. (1 Sam 25:1-3 ESV)

Our text opens with the report of the death of Samuel, Israel's first prophet and honored spiritual leader. Though he had been absent from the drama for some time, his presence hovered over our characters like the Shekinah cloud of glory that guided Israel in the wilderness. His death most likely sent shock waves to David. What will he do without his great intercessor? Would Saul's evil intentions now find their mark? To make sure they didn't, David fled further south to the wilderness of Paran, a vast semi-arid region at the southern end of the Arabah. Here David could roam relatively free from Saul's insane pursuit and could be of service to his countrymen by protecting their flocks from marauding desert tribes.

In that setting we are introduced to two key players in the drama, Nabal and Abigail. Nabal is introduced to us in terms of his possessions, and how he "lives like a king in the region of Maon where Saul had set up a monument to himself (1 Sam 15:12). He has such large herds it is unlikely anyone equals him in wealth."¹ Brueggemann writes,

He is very rich. This way of introducing Nabal is precisely on target, because Nabal's possessions precede his own person. His life is determined by his property. Nabal lives to defend his property, and he dies in an orgy, enjoying his property. Only after we are told of his wealth are we told his name (v. 3a).²

Nabal means "fool" and is synonymous with "evil." Of the many Hebrew terms for fool, *nabal* is perhaps the worst, meaning absolutely incorrigible and unapproachable. He is the fool who believes there is no God (see Ps 14:1, which David composed) and flaunts his independence from God. He has no neighbor, abides by no social obligations and lives by himself for himself. He is obsessive and oppressive, a true Calebite (i.e. a *dog*!).

Abigail ("my father was joyous") on the other hand, was "discerning (penetrating insight) and beautiful," a rare couplet that puts her in the school of the wise. Both terms were also used of David and would make her a good match for the king.

B. An innocent request? (vv. 4-9)

David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep. So David sent ten young men. And David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, and go to Nabal and greet him in my name. And thus you shall greet him: 'Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have. I hear that you have shearers. Now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing all the time they were in Carmel. Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David.'" When David's young men came, they said all this to Nabal in the name of David, and then they waited. (vv. 4-9)

Nabal's business was in Carmel ("garden spot"), about a half hour north of Maon, and it was sheep shearing time, when profits were distributed after summer grazing. These were festive occasions when God's people were generous to the needy and hospitality was liberally extended. In the midst of the celebrations David sent ten of his men to Carmel with a threefold blessing: "Shalom...shalom...shalom." Fokkelman interprets it as the typical Hebrew blessing, "May you continue to enjoy such prosperity for the year ahead, you and your household and all that is yours!"³ For David it is the appropriate occasion to make an appeal for Nabal to reward him for the goodwill he had showed his herdsmen and the protection his men had provided their flocks. As Waltke comments, "His royal banquet, in which he seems to carouse alone, by courtesy should have included the young men that protected him."⁴ David's request is appropriate, polite and open ended, whatever Nabal has on hand.

C. An angry refusal (vv. 10-12)

And Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" So David's young men turned away and came back and told him all this. (vv. 10-12)

Unfortunately, the generosity and openness to which David appeals does not exist in Nabal and he lives up to his name, exposing his meanness. As the proverb says,

**The poor plead for mercy,
but the rich answer harshly. (Prov 18:23 TNIV)**

The question “Who is David?” doesn’t necessarily mean that Nabal does not know who David is, for everyone knows by now, but that he thinks David is a nobody. And “what really sticks in his gullet is that the leader of the gang addresses him as father and thus tries to manipulate him with a suggestion of family relationship.”⁵ Nabal deals in big business and has no time for rogues, runaway slaves or gypsies. On a deeper level he refuses to recognize David’s anointing by God. And that snub ignites David’s rage.

D. Testosterone, rage and war! (v. 13)

And David said to his men, “Every man strap on his sword!” And every man of them strapped on his sword. David also strapped on his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage. (v. 13)

Nabal’s response produces a violent reaction in David. With no pause for reflection or prayer, he instantly sends out battle cry and his men snap into rank and file like a well-oiled war machine to confront the contemptuous Nabal. The man who fought Goliath with a sling and a stone and put no faith in weapons for salvation, now employs every sword in sight for a bloody rampage. What happened to David’s sensitive heart that was able to see murderous Saul as God’s anointed, but now is blinded by the contempt of a fool? If we are shocked and appalled by what we see in David, I suggest we pause and take a good look in the mirror (Rom 7:15).

The narrator paints our would-be hero in the darkest of hues, for he is not the hero today. With David’s moral compass out of commission, the text needs a powerful and shrewd intermediary, one who can take courageous initiative to bring reason and calm to a potentially explosive situation. The heroine in our story is a woman who, like Hannah, will occupy center stage playing the lead role to intervene in a crisis and save the nation. And it is no easy task, for she is caught between two angry men – two who have the greatest potential for abuse: her husband and the king.

II. Crisis Intervention (1 Sam 25:14-21)

A. Abigail hears (vv. 14-17)

But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal’s wife, “Behold, David sent messengers out of the wilderness to greet our master, and he railed at them. Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when we were in the fields, as long as we went with them. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Now therefore know this and consider what you should do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his house, and he is such a worthless man that one cannot speak to him.” (vv. 14-17)

One of Nabal’s young shepherds just happened to be in the field when David’s servants arrived and overheard Nabal railing at them. Fearing the worst he ran back to Carmel and gives the news to the only person he knew could intervene with wisdom and authority, Abigail. The young man’s statement that David and his men “were a wall around us both day and night” amplifies the truth of David’s care for Nabal’s flocks and confirms the gross injustice David was dealt in return.

B. Abigail acts (vv. 18-19)

Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two skins of wine and five sheep already prepared and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on donkeys. And she said to her young men, “Go on before me; behold, I come after you.” But she did not tell her husband Nabal. (vv. 18-19)

With a tsunami of destruction headed towards her home, Abigail wastes no time in attempting to avert the confrontation. With incredible initiative, energy and speed (mahar “haste” is used 3 times – vv. 23, 34, 42) she sets her entire household in motion to gather enough food to

feed David’s 600 men. Then she quickly dispatches the incredible mound of foodstuffs on donkeys to intercept David, hopefully before he arrives with guns blazing. To accord surprise, she sends the gifts first, while she remains hidden in a ravine. Then the beautiful Abigail will descend the slope only at the last moment. As Fokkelman suggests, “in her tactical planning she programs a delay. The bloodlust is checked by curiosity, David’s need for an explanation, and that gives her just enough room to provide such an explanation.”⁶ Brilliant!

The narrator notes that in all her planning Abigail wisely does not tell her husband because lives are at stake and, in case you’ve forgotten, “he is impossible to talk to.”

C. The tension mounts (vv. 20-22)

And as she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, behold, David and his men came down toward her, and she met them. Now David had said, “Surely in vain have I guarded all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him, and he has returned me evil for good. God do so to the enemies of David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him.” (vv. 20-22)

As Abigail makes her descent toward the bloodthirsty mob, the narrator heightens the suspense by making us privy to David’s rash and vulgar vow. David is fuming mad, muttering under his breath how vain was the good he did for such a “fool.” Consumed by rage, he vows to carry out his personal holy war against Nabal’s household, exterminating every “male” in sight. The vow is a bit more colorful in the original and is preserved only in the King James Version. The term glossed “male” is literally, “one who urinates against the wall,” which Fokkelman explains as “an expression of extreme contempt, and possibly, in these Calebite surroundings, an allusion to what a dog does.”⁷ No doubt David’s anger has brought him to the edge of vulgarity.

Abigail has her work cut out for her. How will she be able to disarm the king’s rage and convince him to revoke the irrevocable? What follows is one of the most magnificent examples of intervention and restoration found in Scripture. Abigail is the consummate diplomat.

III. Disarming the Bomb (1 Sam 25:23-31)

A. Her posture: Grace and humility (vv. 23-24)

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, “On me alone, my lord, be the guilt. Please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. (vv. 23-24)

When David first sees Abigail, he is struck by her beauty, humility and tranquility. That is a rare combination that will capture the attention of any man. Her bodily movement is emphatically downward, from riding on the height, to descending her mount, to falling before the king’s feet, to placing her face down to the ground. Her demeanor arouses David’s curiosity and displaces his thirst for revenge. In a moment of reflection, the defenseless Abigail becomes a mirror to David of his posture before king Saul in better days when his heart was sensitive to God’s voice.

In that humble posture she immediately removes the object of David’s anger and shifts all the blame on herself. David is speechless and Abigail ventures on gently but firmly, restoring the wayward king back to health.

B. Her counsel regarding Nabal: “Forget him!” (vv. 25-26)

Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him. But I your servant did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent. Now then, my lord, as the LORD lives, and as your soul lives, because the LORD has restrained you from bloodguilt and from saving with your

own hand, now then let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be as Nabal. (vv. 25-26)

She begins by validating David's anger over the injustice he endured at the hands of her husband. "You're right, my husband is a fool, to be numbered among the 'sons of Belial' (like Eli's sons, 1 Sam 2:12)." A truth she knows all too well. "But do not deal with him; rather, deal with me, for the problem was one of miscommunication, and I've come to set it right." Standing face to face with the beautiful Abigail, David's anger is thoroughly defused.

Now that she has his undivided attention, she has to convince him to take back his rash vow. To do this she removes her husband from the equation and places herself center stage as the Lord's instrument to prevent David from bloodguilt. David's rash and vulgar vow for blood is superseded by her insightful and holy vow to preserve life.

As far as Nabal is concerned, she tells David, "Forget him!" Leave fools alone in their folly, for eventually they will self-destruct. Eugene Peterson notes that, "the Hebrew verb from which fool is derived means 'to collapse.' Closely connected with this is the word for 'corpse.' When the hot air has left the gaudy balloon, all this is visible in a limp bladder."⁸

C. She restores David's identity (vv. 27-31)

And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant. (v. 27)

With Nabal out of the equation, Abigail then addresses the issue of tribute, which she lavishes upon David and takes full responsibility for its delay. But beyond the tangible gift, she speaks right to the heart of what it represents – the outcast son is truly acknowledged as the Lord's anointed in Maon. Abigail had the insight to see that David's rage was triggered not by Nabal's lack of generosity, but by his contempt.

Those fiery insults triggered emotions that went clear back to his childhood when, as the youngest, he had no identity within the family circle and was treated with disdain by his brothers when he tried to enter in (17:28). After he slayed the great giant, Goliath, the history of rejection was poignantly repeated on a national scale. Driven from the royal court by his mad father-in-law, he was forced to live in a God-forsaken wilderness like a wild dog scavenging for food and shelter. And yet, in that wasteland David learned how to pray and gradually through the years there were wonderful signs that the kingdom of God was dawning upon him as more and more people began to acknowledge God's Spirit at work in him.

The testimony was powerful as it was contagious and then, after years of heartache, David heard those validating words every son longs to hear from his father, "Is this your voice, my son David?" (24:16). That long-awaited validation brought a flood of emotion to the surface.

Perhaps now we are in a better frame of mind to discern, like Abigail, how a Celebrite's insults could inflict deep wounds in David's soul, dredging up memories of abuse and abandonment and making them sting like new. When you know someone's story you are able to view them through the lens of compassion and not anger. This is why Paul exhorts us Galatians,

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Gal 6:1)

Understanding is one thing, but how do you bring healing that restores the individual? Abigail is the master nurse and surgeon rolled into one.

For the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD, and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the liv-

ing in the care of the LORD your God. And the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. (vv. 28-29)

After she lances the putrid boil of David's wounded ego, she washes the wound with the cleansing waters of God's grace. In so doing she cleanses his memory from those haunting images of abusive family relationships and replaces them with his new identity as God's adopted son (in vv. 26-31 she uses the divine name, LORD, seven times). With masterful skill she reawakens his youthful memories of slaying the gargantuan giant and the privilege of fighting the Lord's battles. Then with prophetic insight, she casts his vision forward to the glory of his public coronation and his enduring dynasty that will outlast history. The imagery rescues David from tunnel vision that made him a slave to his past, and lifts him into the expansive world of God's redemptive story. Keeping our imagination fixed on the story of God's grace in our lives is the only thing that can overrule the destructive memories of the past. We are a new creation, old things are gone, behold the new has come, pure and simple.

With a renewed perspective of his new identity, privileged calling and secure destiny, David's assembly of an elite force of 400 men to wage holy war on a single fool looks a little absurd. If memory serves him correctly, he might see Saul's image in the mirror (24:14).

D. A warning and a request (vv. 30-31)

And when the LORD has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord taking vengeance himself. And when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant." (vv. 30-31)

Abigail concludes her speech reminding David of God's magnificent promises and that he do nothing to jeopardize his future by shedding needless blood. Such an act would create a staggering burden that would weigh heavily on his heart and compromise his courage to lead. I suspect that today the great void in male leadership is in large part due to consciences that have been crippled by compromise.

Finally, to demonstrate her faith in God's promises, she throws in her lot with the new, as yet unrealized kingdom, just as Rahab did with the spies who invaded Jericho.

IV. David's Repentance (1 Sam 25:32-35)

And David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from avenging myself with my own hand! For as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male." Then David received from her hand what she had brought him. And he said to her, "Go up in peace to your house. See, I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition." (vv. 32-35)

Confronted with his sin in Abigail's persuasive plea, David repents. He completely changes his mind, blessing the Lord who had intervened by sending Abigail to him. Then he praises her intelligence, taste and conduct that so gently disarmed his anger. Finally, he blesses Abigail. She was the lone voice of God in the war between her husband and David. Had it not been for her, David would have shed needless blood and jeopardized his future in the process. Finally, David accepts Abigail's well-timed gift and grants her request and sends her home in peace, having "obeyed her voice." These words were like music to her ears.

Abigail's exemplary behavior did not go unnoticed by Israel's sage and is lifted up as a model to be emulated by all – "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Prov 15:1). Bruce Waltke gives depth and definition to the term,

This self-control is necessary in order to turn back and not stir up the potentially damaging, foolish emotion that destroys social relationships. *Rak* ("gentle") denotes the quality for being tender, soft, delicate in substance and style that soothes and comforts the listener... This thoughtful, compassionate reaction to the opponent without compromising truth turns back his wrath and so restores his good temper and good sense.⁹

Jesus says that servants like Abigail perform the royal work of kings—"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9).

V. The Fruit of Repentance (1 Sam 25:36-42)

A. God vindicates his servants (vv. 36-38)

And Abigail came to Nabal, and behold, he was holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk. So she told him nothing at all until the morning light. In the morning, when the wine had gone out of Nabal, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And about ten days later the LORD struck Nabal, and he died. (vv. 36-38)

After paying tribute to the king, Abigail returned home only to find that her husband was giving himself a party, "like the feast of a king." Being that he was dead drunk, she wisely decides to wait until morning to inform Nabal of the day's events. When Nabal awakes to his hangover and all the wine has gone out of this "male," Abigail delivers the news. His heart dies within him (a stroke?) and he becomes like a stone. In Hebrew "stone" (*lbn*) is "fool" (*nbl*) spelled backwards. As Fokkelman comments,

The name of the man is turned upside down in an alliteration which underlines his end. The true reason for Nabal himself becoming a stone is that in that form he fits in the hollow of God's sling: God intends to fling away his life, into the fathomless depths, away from David.¹⁰

Ten days later, God struck Nabal and he died. "Nabal dies like someone who cannot remain sober when some of his possessions are given away."¹¹ When David hears of Nabal's death, he blesses the Lord for Abigail's intervention in his life and sends a wedding proposal to the new widow.

B. David's proposal (vv. 39-42)

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Blessed be the LORD who has avenged the insult I received at the hand of Nabal, and has kept back his servant from wrongdoing. The LORD has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head." Then David sent and spoke to Abigail, to take her as his wife. When the servants of David came to Abigail at Carmel, they said to her, "David has sent us to you to take you to him as his wife." And she rose and bowed with her face to the ground and said, "Behold, your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord." And Abigail hurried and rose and mounted a donkey, and her five young women attended her. She followed the messengers of David and became his wife.

In a dramatic turn of events, Abigail is freed from marriage to Nabal and invited to join Israel's future king as his bride. But the change in circumstances doesn't alter Abigail's character. Her highest calling, whether as handmaid or wife, is to wash the feet of those who serve the Lord's anointed king. Her humility toward David foreshadows Jesus, who will take up the basin and towel to wash his disciples' feet, instituting feet washing as a high calling in the church and commanding his disciples to do so for one another.

The story ends much like it began, with Abigail, in haste, in a procession with her donkeys, a picture of humility, on her way to meet the royal figure. This time, however, instead of confronting a king in his wrath, she is headed to his warm embrace. A war has been averted, and a wedding inaugurated.

VI. Listening to God's Voice

A. What does God do when the king loses his moral compass and there is no prophet?

Answer: God sends a woman, whose words are as pure and true as any prophet, and function accordingly to restore David to his proper role as king.

The result: A war is averted and a wedding inaugurated. What occurs here is no exception. Women are often the first to feel the burden of a crisis and possess keen intuitive instinct necessary to act. We should also note,

1. Abigail's ability to function as a prophet was not contingent on her husband's support.
2. She did not need official recognition or authorization to function in order to avert the crisis.

Abigail's ministry anticipates the gospels, where women would be the first to be bearers of the good news of Jesus' birth and would become the first witnesses of the resurrection. In the book of Acts they stand equal with men in possession of the Holy Spirit and share equally with prophetic gift.

B. Can you hear God's voice?

If God's charismatic leader, anointed by God's Spirit, needed the intervention of a wise woman to restore his mind and heart to spiritual health, what does that say about us? When asked by the disciples, "Who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," Jesus took a child in his midst and said, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matt 18:4-5).

At the age of sixty, I can tell you I could not survive if I wasn't living in community and open to correction by the multitude of godly voices, especially those of my wife and daughters, whose words I have come to treasure, full of grace and truth.

¹ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 649-650.

² Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 175.

³ J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986), 484.

⁴ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 650.

⁵ Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 485.

⁶ Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 493.

⁷ Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 495.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 120.

⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 612-613.

¹⁰ Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 521.

¹¹ Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 522.