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## Abigail, the Peacemaker

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TThe Bible is an all-embracing tapestry, weaving together the nature and purposes of God, its strands relating how he creates, saves, and blesses. It is brim-filled with great names; lives glorious or tragic; exciting plots and impressive outcomes. Yet, as ordinary individuals, we should not be overwhelmed by the immensity of the biblical stories revealing how God works in our world. The scriptures do not demand us to live out a doctrinal system, a moral or religious code as depicted by its contents. Rather, they invite us to understand what it looks like to be human and what is needed for us to enter and mature as human beings in our stories where God is the pivotal theme. In studying biblical stories and characters, we can indeed glimpse how we should or should not live our lives. But, even more, we see how in fact we do live, how our everyday experiences are the very building blocks that Goduses to work out his purposes of salvation in us and in the world.

The story of Abigail dramatically compares the character and temperament of a gracious, discerning woman with that of her surly, bigoted husband Nabal. Abigail deflected the blame for a tense state of conflict between Nabal and David, away from her husband to herself,
and, in so doing, brought calm to a situation that had had the potential of becoming a massacre of innocent people. Further, her actions not only appeased David's anger, but stopped him from taking revenge with his own hands.

## Setting the Scene

## Historical background

God had personally governed his people Israel for centuries. Throughout this theocratic rule, God used his anointed leaders to govern his people, the last leaders being called judges. Samuel was the last of the judges, and he also functioned as a prophet. The people had a leader they could trust, a leader of integrity, one on whom they could rely. However, despite Samuel's leading the people closer to God and the nation's growing in its trust of his leadership, Israel longed for a king like the nations around her. Samuel was disappointed with their request, so he brought it before the Lord. After reassuring Samuel that Israel's call for a king represented a crisis of confidence in God himself rather than their lack of trust and confidence in Samuel, God allowed the people to have their way. Through Samuel, God decided that Saul would fulfill the role, and so Saul was acclaimed by the people as their first earthly king.

In 1050 B.C., Saul began his reign as king with national trust at its highest level, the result of Samuel's faithful work rather than the effect of Saul being the new king. Samuel's decision to merge a ceremony of covenant renewal with the formal installation of Saul as king established the king as an instrument of God's covenantal rule of Israel; the king did not govern in his own right, but under the authority of God. The king only exercised authority legitimately while he remained obedient to God. However, Saul showed his true colors and made three major mistakes in which he refused to obey Samuel, subsequently leading to God's rejection of him as king. God was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel and, again through Samuel, chose the young David to succeed him.

After being rejected by God, Saul became increasingly subject to periods of depression that sometimes verged on madness. Ironically,

David the musician was appointed to provide comfort for Saul's melancholy, and so their lives became intertwined. After David became a national hero by killing the Philistine Goliath, Saul became jealous of him and tried to kill him. David had no choice but to become an outlaw, supported by a band of fugitives who lived on the margins of Israelite society. So David knew that Saul was an irrational ruler whose days were numbered. He knew that he himself was to become king. As the story of Abigail unfolds, David had been living as an outlaw in the desert, surrounded by his six hundred fugitive men whom he had turned into a fighting force, constantly pursued by Saul's men for the last eleven or twelve years. Despite Saul's murderous attempts on his life, David had proved himself loyal and faithful to his king, refusing to retaliate.

## Social and economic background

David and his men acted as a type of vigilante force, protecting the flocks of wealthy livestock owners from raiders and wild animals. The custom was that when the sheep were sheared, these "security guards" would be paid a gratuity, a thank-you for their protection. Sheep, and the more common goats, were a major feature of ancient Israel's rural economy, being used for food, fabric, within the sacrificial system, as a method of payment and as a measure of wealth. Tents were made with fabric spun from goat hair, as were the curtains of the tabernacle. Sheep were used in striking bargains and were also a measure of God's blessing on the owner. Annually, in springtime, the sheep would be sheared, cutting off the whole woolen coat of the animal. The lanolin contained in the fleece would be removed as a sweet-smelling, softening, thick oil used in cleansing and beauty treatments. The fleece would then be spun to make woolen clothes.

## Time and location

1 Samuel 25 opens with the statement that Samuel died and all Israel assembled and mourned for him, burying him at his home in Ramah, some five or six kilometers northeast of Jerusalem. David
then moved into the desert of Maon, ${ }^{\text {' }}$ about forty kilometers south of Jerusalem and just south of Carmel.

## The characters

We have already noted the character of Israel's king-elect, David. He was in a very difficult position, being hounded by Saul who had already made many attempts on his life, banished to living in the wilderness with his band of renegades, yet knowing from Samuel that he was chosen by God to become heir to the throne. When an amazing opportunity presented itself, he had shown great restraint and understanding of God's law when he had not taken revenge on Saul. ${ }^{2}$

Nabal-the very name meant "Fool," and folly went with this man. ${ }^{3}$ Folly is a lack of wisdom or contempt for wisdom, which shows itself in a lack of understanding and obedience. Scripture contrasts human foolishness with divine wisdom. Human folly is seen in rebellion against God, ignoring his way and will, a failure to understand him, encompassing moral and/or spiritual irresponsibility. Nabal was "surly and mean in his dealings." ${ }^{4}$ His servant described him as "such a wicked man that no one can talk to him," a man who hurled insults at David's messengers as they offered him their master's greetings. ${ }^{5}$ He was disrespectful, stingy and miserly, belligerent, obstinate, arrogant, ill-mannered, and rude. His reluctance to part with his money or possessions was foolishness indeed and, like all miserliness, led to misery.

He "was very wealthy. He had a thousand goats and three thousand sheep." Ungodly people often make the possession of wealth a priority. They do not understand the true nature of wealth, and they do not realize that they will have to face God in judgment. The ungodly grow rich, often obtaining their riches unjustly, accumulating, hoarding, and trusting in their riches. However, the ungodly, like all people, must

[^0]leave their riches to others. Lastly, Nabal was a drunk and a glutton.? His excessive eating and drinking represented greed, the unrestrained self-indulgence that often leads to a deeper iniquity, and represents a rejection of godly moderation.

Abigail was the antithesis of her husband. She was beautiful both physically and spiritually, bringing pleasure to those who beheld her. She was intelligent, ${ }^{8}$ using her human cleverness to the full in God's service and to dedicating her gifts and abilities to him. She was wise and prudent, sensitive and sensible, generous and hospitable.

Outward appearance, that which is visible externally, may reveal the true person, but often it misleads instead. Here, both Nabal and Abigail had outward appearances that reflected their real characters.

David, Nabal, and Abigail

During the winter months, in the desert of Maon, David and his men had been safeguarding the flocks of Nabal. It was now springtime. On hearing that Nabal was shearing sheep in Carmel, David sent ten of his young men to greet Nabal and ask for the gratuity payment due to them in respect of their protection of his animals and shepherds. They were to suggest to Nabal that he could check with his own servants as to their worth in doing this work and, since sheepshearing was a festive time, to ask him to give them and their master David whatever he could find for them.

David's men showed grace in their manner of approach to Nabal, and naturally expected grace in return - grace expressed as generosity and kindness. They waited. Instead they were met with insults, prejudice, contempt, and indifference. Nabal answered, "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where? ${ }^{\prime \prime}$ In biblical times, meat was a luxury, eaten at special times such as this festival of sheep-shearing.

[^1]Likewise, this was desert country, so water was also very precious. Nabal was certainly not going to share any hospitality with these rogues!

The ten young men turned round and went back to report every word to their master. David was furious. He commanded four hundred of his men to put on their swords, armed himself likewise, and, leaving two hundred men to stay with their supplies, set out.

Meanwhile, one of Nabal's shepherds told Abigail, Nabal's wife, what had happened. He related how David had sent his messengers to salute Nabal, but that the wealthy owner had responded by tearing into them with insults. The shepherd confirmed that David's men had protected them very well during the previous months, but, unless his mistress could do something quickly, disaster would befall them since nobody could reason with her impossible husband.

Using her intelligence and great discernment, Abigail had to think of a way to bring calm to this tense situation, a way that would appease David whilst protecting Nabal. Acknowledging David as God's anointed, she knew that his anger should be defused and he should be discouraged from carrying out revenge with his own hands. Further, she appreciated that she had to leave room for God to move in his time and in his way in her husband's life. However, Abigail recognized that her conduct must ultimately honor the Lord. She flew into action. She had a feast of bread, wine, mutton (sheep meat), roasted grain, raisin cakes, and fig cakes loaded on to some donkeys, asked her servants to go on ahead of her, and followed on her donkey. She said nothing to Nabal.

As Abigail followed the feast fit for a king, her donkey descending into a ravine, David and his men were descending into the same ravine from the opposite direction. David had just been talking with his men, bemoaning the fact that all his efforts to protect Nabal's property in the desert had been useless, had been rewarded with nothing but insults, his good being repaid with evil. He vowed to destroy every male in Nabal's household by the morning. He was out for revenge. Likè Nabal, he was demonstrating folly by ignoring God's command, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but
love your neighbor as yourself." ${ }^{10}$ He was stooping to the depths of a Pharaoh of a previous era. ${ }^{11}$

Abigail and David met there on the road. Abigail quickly dismounted and fell on her knees at his feet, her face to the ground in homage, a gesture of reverence, honor, and submission before a future king appointed by God. "My lord, let me take the blame!" 12 What a gentle and sensitive spirit! Of course her husband deserved everything that was coming to him, but Abigail was prepared to shoulder the responsibility for the grave situation. She was not concerned about her own safety and reputation, but was willing to sacrifice herself to protect her husband and the innocent family members whose lives were in such danger. She was also thinking about David's future.
"Please let me speak to you. Listen to what your servant has to say. Don't dwell on what that brute Nabal did. He acts out his name: Nabal, fool-and foolishness oozes from him. I wasn't there when the young men my master sent arrived. I didn't see them. And now, my master, as God lives and as you live, God has kept you from this avenging murder-and may your enemies, all who seek my master's harm, end up like Nabal! Now take this gift that I your servant girl, have brought to my master, and give it to the young men who follow in the steps of my master.
"Forgive my presumption! But God is at work in my master, developing a rule solid and dependable. My master fights God's battles! As long as you live no evil will stick to you.

If anyone stands in your way,
if anyone tries to get you out of the way,
Know this: Your God-honored life is tightly bound in the bundle of God-protected life;
But the lives of your enemies will be hurled aside as a stone is thrown from a sling.
"When God completes all the goodness he has promised my master and sets you up as prince over Israel, my master will not have

[^2]this dead weight in his heart, the guilt of an avenging murder. And when God has worked things for good for my master, remember me. ${ }^{1 / 3}$

Abigail was seeking David's forgiveness for her audacity in approaching him and speaking to him in this way. She was admitting negligence for not being around, for not offering hospitality when David's messengers had arrived. Likewise, she was apologizing for her husband's appalling behavior. Far more imperative, however, was her recognition of David as God's appointed servant and future leader of Israel, a man who fought God's battles. She was declaring the urgency of averting his desire for revenge, the potential guilt of which would have been "on his conscience" as a "staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself." ${ }^{14}$ With careful discernment, avoiding rash behavior or speech, and showing tact and wisdom in her relationship with David, Abigail's prudence had averted disaster. A lowly "servant," she had counseled a future king!

David responded by praising God for having sent Abigail to intervene. He asked the Lord to bless her for her good judgment and for keeping him from becoming guilty of bloodshed or of avenging himself, rather than leaving revenge to the Lord. He then accepted the gifts she had brought on the donkeys, telling her to return home in peace. He had acknowledged her words and promised to grant her request.

When Abigail reached home, Nabal was holding his own "king's banquet" and was very drunk. She deferred telling him what she had done until he had sobered up in the morning. On hearing the whole story, he had a heart attack and fell into a coma. Some ten days later, he died. David, learning of Nabal's demise, again praised the Lord, this time for upholding his cause against Nabal, for keeping him from an evil act, and for bringing Nabal's wrongdoing down on his own head. He then sent his servants to Abigail in Carmel, telling her that David had sent them to take her to become his wife. Still true to character, Abigail bowed down to them, with her face to the ground, saying she was ready to serve them and wash their feet-expressing,

[^3]once more, hospitality and servanthood. She quickly mounted a donkey and, attended by her five maids, went with the messengers and became David's wife.

## Reflections

This short, concise saga of human behavior in the face of crisis offers us profound models of godly and ungodly characteristics. We should not, however, attempt to mold ourselves to fit the godly virtues, to "think like this in order to live well." Rather we must read in it the very humanness of the characters, their strengths and weaknesses, their relationships to each other and, ultimately, their relationship with God. And then we can begin to perceive ourselves, our own humanity. Human life, other than mere biology, must deal with God. We need to constantly and prayerfully ask ourselves, "Where does God fit into this? Is he central, or have I placed him on the periphery, or have I omitted him altogether?"

Undoubtedly, Abigail was a noble and virtuous woman, comparable to the later "wife of noble character." ${ }^{1 s}$ She had God at the center of her life: He was her Lord, her King, and her Master. Her thinking and her actions revolved around God. She was sensitive, having deep feelings for others and sympathy for their needs, leading to appropriate action on their behalf.

David also was sensitive, though here he was oversensitive to Nabal's rejection, and this led to his hasty reaction of seeking revenge. It is interesting to consider why David should react in this way in this story, when he had previously chosen not to take revenge against Saul, ${ }^{16}$ and would again spare Saul's life in a subsequent encounter. ${ }^{17}$ Why was God a central consideration when David was dealing with Saul, but was somehow missing from the equation when it came to Nabal? Could it have been because of the difference in status of the two men? In the situation with Nabal, in his haste did he forget God's commandment?

[^4]It is mine to avenge; I will repay.
In due time their foot will slip:
their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them. ${ }^{18}$

Whatever the reason, David's reaction to Nabal's insults was to take revenge - to kill him and all the male members of his household before the next dawn. How often do we do that, flare up in anger, seeking retaliation against someone for some offense, getting the situation out of all proportion? Yet, if God is truly at the center of our lives, he will answer our prayer: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. ${ }^{\prime \prime}$ He will use other people, events, or situations to stop us sinning. He used Abigail to stop David.

As we study the characters in this and other Bible stories, may we prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit to work in us a desire for such godly characteristics as displayed by Abigail: generosity, hospitality, prudence, virtue, patience, wisdom, sensitivity, discernment, and peacemaking. May we ask for these in the words of James: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt. ${ }^{20}$


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    ${ }^{2} 1$ Sam 24.
    ${ }^{3} 1$ Sam 25:25.
    ${ }^{4} 1$ Sam 25:3.
    ${ }^{5} 1$ Sam 25:15, 17.
    ${ }^{6} 1$ Sam 25:2.

[^1]:    ${ }^{7} 1$ Sam 25:36.
    ${ }^{8} 1$ Sam 25:3.
    ${ }^{9} 1$ Sam 25:10-11.

[^2]:    ${ }^{10}$ Lev 19:18.
    "Ex 7-11.
    ${ }^{\prime 2} 1$ Sam 25:24a.

[^3]:    ${ }^{13} 1$ Sam 25:24b-31 from The Message, by E. H. Peterson
    ${ }^{14} 1$ Sam 25:31.

[^4]:    ${ }^{15}$ Prov 31:10-31.
    ${ }^{16} 1$ Sam 24.
    ${ }^{17} 1$ Sam 26.

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