

Abigail's story

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1 Samuel 25: 2-44

- 3 *“The name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. And she was a woman of good understanding and beautiful appearance; but the man was harsh and evil in his doings. He was of the house of Caleb.”*

Abigail means, “Father rejoiced, or father's joy”. Nabal means “Fool, senseless”.

Two questions immediately occur:

1. Why did Nabal's parents name him that?
2. Why did Abigail marry such a man, if she was, “a woman of good understanding and beautiful appearance, and he, “harsh and evil in his doings”?

1. In Native American culture, they leave off naming a child until something of his character appears. Still, it is somewhat unhelpful to re-inforce negative character traits with a name. Names in the Bible are often prophetic. Part of the role of parents to prophecy over their children. Jonathan, “Gift of God”. Prophetic as to what was going on in the nation: when the Ark of the Lord was captured, Eli's daughter in law went into premature labour and gave birth to a son, who she named “Ichabod”, ie “The Glory has departed” (I Samuel 4.21).

The Bible is very informative on the source of foolishness. Here are a few references:

“The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God”” (Psalms 14:1, & 53:1).

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

So, foolishness draws you away from God, and disqualifies you from heavenly knowledge and wisdom.

“Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call on the Lord? There they are in great fear, for God is with the generation of the righteous” (Psalms 14: 4-5).

Foolishness gets you ensnared with fear, because you reject the love of God, and “Perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment” (I John 4:18).

“A fool despises his father's instruction, but he who receives correction is prudent” (Proverbs 15:5).

Maybe your old dad isn't such an idiot after all. The biblical concept of prudence has nothing to do with the modern notion of squandering the nation's wealth in the good times so that there is nothing left in the kitty when times get hard.

“Why is there in the hand of a fool the purchase-price of wisdom, since he has no heart for it?” (Proverbs 17:16).

Saddest of all:

“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15).

Perhaps, if Nabal’s parents had corrected him, rather than prophesying foolishness over him, he might not have grown up into a harsh and evil man.

God’s view:

“He does not delight in the strength of the horse: he takes no pleasure in the legs of a man. The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope for his mercy” (Psalm 147: 10-11).

Contrast foolishness with wisdom and its fruits:

“Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand, in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3: 13-17)

As one preacher put it, the fruits of wisdom are a long good life, riches, honour, pleasure, peace. You can’t do better than that.

2 Why did Abigail marry him, if she was a woman of good understanding? Maybe she was seduced by good looks, a glamorous life-style, and fast cars. She wouldn’t have been the first woman to discover that the man she married was not the same man who courted her. Otherwise, it might have been her family’s doing – an arranged marriage: to me, given Abigail’s good sense, this is the more likely answer. From her family’s perspective, his wealth and position would have made him an advantageous match, whatever his character.

Once married, she was stuck with him. It was not the sort of culture where you could easily escape from a loveless or abusive marriage.

7 *“Your shepherds were with us, and we did not hurt them, nor was there anything missing from them all the while they were in Carmel.”*

In those days, you did not want armies anywhere near your land. You still don’t. During the Thirty Years’ War in Europe 1618-1648, the passage of warring armies across northern Europe was utterly devastating. In the Electorate of Brandenburg in Northern Germany:

“In 1638, the imperial and Saxon armies passed through the little town of Lenzen ... to the north-west of Berlin, where they tore all the wood and equipment from the houses before putting them to the torch. Whatever householders rescued from the flames, the soldiers took from them by force. Hardly had the imperials departed, but the Swedes attacked and plundered the town, treating the ‘citizens, women and children so gruesomely that such things were never told of the Turks’ ... The men raised by the Elector himself were not much better than the invaders ... a report filed ... from the district of Telow near Berlin stated that the troops of the Brandenburg commander ... had been plundering the area, threshing corn they found and treating the local people ‘in a manner as inhumane as, indeed worse than, the enemy could have done’” (The Iron Kingdom – The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947, Christopher Clark, Penguin Allen Lane, 2006, pp 34-5)

- 8 *Therefore, let my young men find favour in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever comes to your hand to your servants and to your son David.*

There was a tradition of hospitality in Israel. Also, it was customary to give gifts on feast days, and so it was not unreasonable for David to approach Nabal for support at such a time. As noted, armies have a way of getting what they want, but David had been scrupulous in respecting Nabal’s property.

- 9 *Then Nabal answered David’s servants and said, “Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who break away each one from his master. Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give it to men when I do not know where they are from?”*

Nabal’s response was about as insulting as it could possibly have been. Nabal indicated that he regarded David as an outlaw, not even a legitimate Israelite. He knew very well – as did all of Israel, after he destroyed Goliath – who David was, and that he was the son of Jesse. It was a very deliberate insult. It is difficult for us in the West to understand the force of this insult. In Afghan society for example:

“Blood is a powerful thing, *bachem*, never forget that ... Take Amir jan, here. We all knew his father, I know who his grandfather was in Kabul and his great-grandfather before him, I could sit here and trace generations of his ancestors for you if you asked. That’s why when his father – God give him peace – came *khastegari*, I didn’t hesitate. And believe me, his father wouldn’t have agreed to ask for your hand if he didn’t know whose descendant you were. Blood is a powerful thing, [my darling] ... Now, if you were American, it wouldn’t matter. People here marry for love, family name and ancestry never even come into the equation. But we are Afghans...” (The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini, Bloomsbury, 2003, pp 163-4).

Nabal was showing disrespect for David and his entire blood line; as if to say, “I don’t think you have any part or inheritance in Israel or the covenant with God” –throwing back in David’s teeth, David’s own taunt of Goliath, “For who is this uncircumcised [ie, no-covenant] Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (I Samuel

17:26). Israel did not have much of a professional army, but raised armies from the twelve tribes as needed: it is therefore likely that Nabal had been on the battlefield that day, and witnessed the fight. Perhaps Nabal was jealous or resentful – David had shown up every man in Israel that day. You can hear Nabal’s mother saying, “Fine man you are, shown up by a shepherd boy! Why couldn’t you have taken out the Philistine giant?” As we have seen, not much affirmation in that family!

13 *Then David said to his men, “Every man gird on his sword”.*

Nabal has a fight on his hands, but fortunately, his servant has the sense to go behind his back and speak to Abigail about it. Verses 14 to 17 indicate that the servant recognized how good David’s men had been, and that Nabal’s insults would lead to swift retribution.

18 *Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep already dressed, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded them on donkeys. And she said to her servants, “Go on before me; see, I am coming after you.”*

Abigail had the sense to see that the situation was desperate, and this was no time to be hanging around.

19 *But she did not tell her husband Nabal.*

This is a decisive point in the marriage of Nabal and Abigail. I think this was the moment that she finally left Nabal emotionally and practically. We’ll see when she meets David that she regarded Nabal as a dead man.

20 *So it was, as she rode on the donkey, that she went down under the cover of the hill; and there were David and his men, coming down toward her, and she met them. Now David had said, “Surely in vain I have protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belongs to him. And he has repaid me evil for good. May God do so, and more also, to the enemies of David, if I leave one male of all who belong to him by morning light”. Now when Abigail saw David, she dismounted quickly from the donkey, fell on her face before David, and bowed down to the ground.*

How did Abigail know which one of these armed men was David? Had she met him before? They moved in the same circles. Their eyes could have met over a glass of Pimms at the Eton Harrow match; maybe he had marked her card at the Hunt Ball, or he could have been at school with one of her brothers. Maybe, even, they had been going out, but her father had broken it up, as the eighth son was never going to amount to much.

Then begins her remarkable speech.

24 *So she fell at his feet and said: “On me, my lord, on me let this iniquity be!”*

Abigail had the heart of an intercessor – she identifies with the object of her intercession. Compare her attitude with Daniel’s:

“And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, ‘O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep his commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments ... O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face as it is this day...” (Daniel 9: 4-7).

Daniel owned Israel’s sin as his own: similarly, Abigail takes on Nabal’s sin as if it were hers.

- 24 *And please let your maidservant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your maidservant. Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him! But I, your maidservant, did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent.*

You might think her disloyal to dish her husband to David in this way, but I think it has got beyond the point where Abigail can save Nabal’s household by any appeal to his good name: he is already a dead man. She has to base her appeal elsewhere.

- 26 *Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, since the LORD has held you back from coming to bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hand...*

Anyone who has been in sales will recognize Abigail’s use of the Assumptive Close: “If you will just sign here...” or “... shall I have the goods delivered next Thursday?” In sales, they say, “ABC: always be closing!” but some authorities regard closing techniques as dangerous, as they antagonise experienced buyers. In one example, it got the response, “Will you leave quietly, or shall I have Security throw you out?” – which, if you think about it, is a fine example of the Alternative Close!

Abigail knows the scriptures; in particular the injunction against avenging yourself, and this is where she starts.

“Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; their foot shall slip in due time; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things to come hasten upon them” (Deuteronomy 32:35).

David himself (if he is in fact the author of Psalm 94) picks up the same theme:

“O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongs – O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth! Rise up, O Judge of the earth; render punishment to the proud. LORD, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?” (Psalm 94: 1-3).

You have ask yourself if David could have written that, but for this encounter with Abigail.

This story, in fact, illuminates this scripture: shortly after being saved from the sword by his wife's intervention, Nabal died of a stroke.

26 ... now then, let your enemies and those who seek harm for my lord be as Nabal.

Once again, we can see that Abigail regards Nabal as a man whose life is forfeit, since her curse upon the enemies of David is that they should be "as Nabal", ie, prone, defenceless and subject to divine judgment.

27 *And now this present which your maidservant has brought to my lord, let it be given to the young men who follow my lord.*

What a shame that, what Nabal could have given as an offering, in verse 10, becomes a means of appeasing wrath! What blessing was lost to the house of Nabal! He could have become a favoured member of David's court, having sustained him in his hour of need. As it was, I should think the estate became Abigail's dowry when she married David. Nothing is said about heirs or kinsmen – the narrative doesn't go into detail about the redemption of the land as it does in the story of Ruth. You could say, based on verse 42, that Abigail married David with no more than a donkey and five bridesmaids to her name. But I personally think it more likely that David redeemed the estate, and Abigail with it.

In any event, it seems that Nabal was the last of his house, no issue, no heritage, no further place in the history of Israel; did not enjoy the fruits of righteousness or see his children's children. There was not much blessing operating in his life. In fact, Abigail was the blessing of God to him: God had given her to him, and her presence in his life had the capacity to bring redemption to him, but he would not have it. In the end, even she had to turn her back on him in order to avert the destruction that his foolish words had brought upon his household. There are lots of people that God does not have to judge: their own words and deeds bring destruction down on them.

And then Abigail begins to prophesy.

28 *Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant. For the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord fights the battles of the LORD, and evil is not found in you throughout your days. Yet a man has risen to pursue you and seek your life, but the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; and the lives of your enemies He shall sling out as from the pocket of a sling. And it shall come to pass, when the LORD has done for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you ruler over Israel, that this will be no grief to you, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself.*

This is a remarkable speech, because God has clearly showed Abigail something of what He has in mind for David. In particular, this is the first mention in the Bible of David of granting him "an enduring house", the first indication that the Messiah will come from the house of David. The next mention is probably 30 years later, in 2 Samuel 7: 5-16,

Nathan's speech when he is bringing the Word of the Lord to David after his prayer about building the temple (also recorded in 1 Chronicles 7:4-14):

"... Also, the LORD tells you that He will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers. I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever ...And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever" (verses 11-13, 16)

He heard it from Abigail first! What more convincing evidence that they were meant for each other that she carried such a powerful anointing to speak into his life!

31 *But when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your maidservant.*

Isn't that a bit come-hitherish? "Remember" is a covenant word. Could Abigail have been signalling a willingness to enter into a covenant with David – ie, marriage – once God had dealt with Nabal? She had already as good as left Nabal in her own mind.

35 *So David received from her hand what she had brought him, and said to her, "Go up in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and respected your person".*

David is, I think, responding in kind. He could be saying no more than, "I'm not going to kill you or violate you", but there seems to be more of a sub-text than that. David watched her go, and I bet she looked back a couple of times as she went!

36 *Now Abigail went to Nabal, and there 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; therefore she told him nothing, little or much, until morning light. So it was, when the wine had gone from Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became like a stone.*

How like a woman to save the bad news until you have a hangover!

Until this moment, Nabal is completely oblivious of the disaster that Abigail has averted. As with Belshazzar, Nabal's doom comes upon him unawares. The passage is also reminiscent of the story Jesus tells in Luke 12 about the man who builds barns to store all his crops, and decides to "eat, drink and be merry", take early retirement, kick back and have a good time:

"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12: 20-21).

Note that it isn't the treasure that Jesus is criticizing, but the failure to be rich toward God.

38 *Then it happened, after about ten days, that the LORD struck Nabal, and he died.*

This part of the story seems a little bit too neat an illustration of Deuteronomy 32: 35 for my liking: step out of the way, and God will judge! Within ten days the man had died, and Abigail was free to marry David. If only life were like that! In reality, you can't guarantee that, if you forbear avenging yourself upon your enemy, God will step in and finish the job within a couple of weeks, like taking out a contract!

Anyway, God did take vengeance swiftly on that occasion, and David did not hang about either, but immediately send his young men to bear his proposal of marriage to Abigail.

42 *So Abigail rose in haste and rode on a donkey, attended by five of her maidens; and she followed the messengers of David, and became his wife.*

She always seems to be rushing about! Strike while the iron is hot! And so God rewards a faithful woman with a husband who is worthy of her.

It feels like a bit of a slap in the face for Abigail, that David takes another wife, Ahinoam of Jezreel, in the very next verse! But then it isn't until the New Testament that you find one man and one woman in lifetime partnership definitively established as the model for marriage. In Old Testament times, a large number of wives and mistresses was a mark of the king's prestige. We see later that David also got his first wife, Michal, back after Saul's death, but the account suggests that it was not a happy marriage, since she despised his manner of worship, and became barren as a result.