

INSULT AND INJURY

1 Samuel 25:1-31

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, February 28, 2010

“Please forgive the trespass of your servant. For the LORD will certainly make my lord 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” (1 Sam. 25:28).

Some news is so momentous that it can only be reported in stark facts. Thus on April 13, 1912, the *Boston Daily Globe* headline read, “Titanic Sinks: 1500 Die.” Thirty-three years later on that date, the *San Francisco Chronicle* announced, “FDR Dies!” On September 12, 2001, the *New York Times* headline read, “America Attacked.” In this same spirit of emphatic brevity, 1 Samuel 25:1 announces, “Now Samuel died.” Thus was reported a watershed in the history of God’s ancient people Israel as significant as the death of Moses so many years beforehand. Not only was Samuel the greatest of Israel’s leaders since at least Joshua, Moses’ successor, but his departure sealed a decisive transition in Israel’s divinely appointed governance, from Spirit-empowered judges to royal dynasties.

Samuel was the last of the judges and founder of the school of the prophets, a line that would culminate in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Lord gave Samuel the task of anointing, protecting, and preparing the great romantic champion of the Old Testament, King David, whose throne was erected for the eternal reign of Jesus, God’s and David’s Son. Thus, though Samuel had abdicated day-to-day leadership of Israel with the coronation of king Saul, the old prophet-judge did not lay down his life until Saul had publicly acknowledged David’s right to rule in his place. 1 Samuel 24 concludes with Saul’s admission to David, “I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in

your hand” (v. 20). Only then are we permitted to learn, “Now Samuel died” (1 Sam. 25:1).

When great and godly men die, even their detractors are forced to mourn their passing. Therefore, “all Israel assembled and mourned for him, and they buried him in his house at Ramah” (1 Sam. 25:1). This raises the question, Was David present for Samuel’s burial? The answer seems to be No. Saul’s relentless pursuit had driven David into the southern desert regions, and it is doubtful that David would have come back north to Israel’s heartland for Samuel’s burial, especially since our text places him further south still, into the deep desert of the Sinai peninsula, “down to the wilderness of Paran” (1 Sam. 25:1). Did David feel even more vulnerable with Samuel’s departure, so that he put distance between himself and Saul? Sensing a final and decisive period in his life, did David retreat into the desert to be closer to God, prefiguring Jesus’ sojourn into the wilderness after his baptism? Given David’s conduct in this chapter, it is likely that his retreat was based more on fear than on faith. Still, David must have realized that a time of testing was before him that would determine his worthiness to rule as Israel’s king.

DAVID’S HUMBLE APPEAL

After David’s personal retreat in the same desert where Israel had sojourned in the exodus, he returned to his small army and its many problems. Most immediate was the problem of logistics, as David relied upon the surrounding populace to support his sizable force of six hundred fighters, along with families and camp followers. Not far from Ziph, where he earlier had fled, were the towns of Maon and Carmel. There, David encountered the servants of a man named Nabal. This man “was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats” (1 Sam. 25:2). David knew that he was obligated to ensure his army’s good behavior, and there is every evidence that he did his best to live in peace with the surrounding populace. We later hear from Nabal’s workers that David’s “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” (1 Sam. 25:15-16).

In short, David was a good neighbor. Instead of allowing his men to take liberties with the available livestock or to use their superior armed strength to intimidate and exploit the nearby people, David's men protected the innocent who were around them. They respected property. They lived out Paul's teaching to the churches in Galatia: "as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Far from the natural expectation that a certain amount of loss was inevitable from having a large roving band in the region, Nabal's property was unusually preserved so that his gain was increased. This is the influence that Christians should have in our communities, neighborhoods, and families: our presence should be an unusual source of benefit and blessing to those around us. As David's men were "very good" to Nabal's household, people who know us at work, around the block, or at play should say, "It was so good to know them!"

It was important for David to have a good reputation with his neighbors. As one called to rule as king over Israel, it was essential that he uphold not only the letter but the spirit of the law, including its requirements for justice and mercy. Here, David proved himself to be a good shepherd not only over his own flock but over the flocks of those nearby, demonstrating his fitness to lead God's people. Since Nabal's men stated that David's force was "a wall to us both by night and by day," we see that David embraced God's requirement that we be our neighbor's keeper (Gen. 4:9).

All this while, however, David was himself in considerable need. His service to the Lord required support from God's people, and with hundreds of mouths to feed every day David needed generous supply and aid. Knowing that it was the time for the shearing of Nabal's vast flocks, David sent ten delegates to seek provision from wealthy Nabal.

Just as David's neighborliness provides a model for us, so also did David's gracious approach to Nabal seeking aid. "Go to Nabal and greet him in my name," David ordered. "And thus you shall greet him: 'Peace be to you, peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have'" (1 Sam. 25:6). William Blaikie comments, "No envying of his prosperity – no grudging to him his abundance; but only the

Christian wish that he might have God’s blessing with it, and that it might all turn to good.”¹ David’s men were to point out that Nabal’s shepherds had been protected from harm, losing none of their flocks while David’s band was around. As the recent experience of Keilah had shown, the nearby Philistines posed a real threat to large herds (1 Sam. 23:5), a threat that David had averted for Nabal. Nabal could learn of this from his own people. “Therefore,” they were to ask, “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” (1 Sam. 25:8).

David’s request was humble – he named himself as “your son David” – and it was reasonable, asking for logistical support at a time when Nabal enjoyed abundance. With all this in mind, David must have sent his men with expectations of a friendly and generous response. After all, he was not treating with Canaanites but fellow Israelites, even fellow Judahites. Nabal hailed from the noble clan of Caleb, noted in Israel’s history for godliness and faith. Given his treatment of Nabal’s shepherds, the respectfulness of his manner, and the timing of his appeal, David had every expectation of a kind and generous response, a properly neighborly return for the good that David had performed for rich Nabal.

INSULT AND INJURY

The biblical account of David is a study in contrasts. On this occasion, we meet another man who contrasts sharply with David.

Nabal had assets, namely his riches and the good name of his Calebite family, but he lacked character. He “was harsh and badly behaved” (1 Sam. 25:3). Nabal was to money what Saul was to power; he was corrupted to such an extent that his very name meant “Fool”. This does not signify silly playfulness, but “implies viciousness, atheism, and materialism.”² Walter Brueggeman comments: “His life is determined by his property. Nabal lives to defend his property, and he dies in an orgy, enjoying his property.

¹ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 383.

² Daniel M. Doriani, *David the Anointed* (Great Commission Publications, 1984), 63.

Only after being told of his riches are we told his name.”³ We wonder if David had Nabal in mind when he penned Psalm 14:1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good.” In the Hebrew, this reads, “Nabal says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

Psalm 14 perfectly describes Nabal in his hard-hearted reply to David’s plea for help. He not only refused to share out of his abundance, but he added insult to injury. He 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” (1 Sam. 25:10). It is obvious that Nabal knew very well who David was, since he names David’s father, even as he pretends to view him as a no-account. Indeed, it is not realistically possible that David’s fame had not preceded him to Maon and Carmel. Nabal went farther and scorned David as a mere renegade who was beneath his charity: “Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat... and give it to men who come from I do not know where?” (1 Sam. 25:11).

Nabal provides a model for a wrong attitude towards wealth and possessions. How little he considered God’s generosity towards himself in his response to David’s humble request. William Blaikie writes: “It was the time of sheep-shearing, when the flocks were probably counted and the increase over last year ascertained; and by a fine old custom it was commonly the season of liberality and kindness. A time of increase should always be so; it is the time for helping poor relations..., for acknowledging ancient kindnesses, for relieving distress, and for devising liberal things for the Church of Christ.”⁴

What led Nabal to be so miserly with his money? The answer is found in verse 11, where the words “I” and “my” occur so frequently: “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?” We are reminded of the rich fool in Jesus’ parable, who spoke so constantly in the first person that he only had himself to talk to: “I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones,

³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 175.

⁴ Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 383.

and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry” (Lk. 12:18-19). The problem was, as Jesus points out, that his own life did not even belong to himself, much less his possessions: “God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” (Lk. 12:20). “So is the one,” Jesus concluded, “who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:21).

Nabal heaped false charges upon David – denouncing him as a no-account scoundrel – because he did not want to admit that he loved money more than his fellow man. In the same way, the greedy man today does not merely refuse to give to the needs of the poor, but he adds abusive comments about their laziness; he holds tight his wallet when funds are requested for the work of the gospel, complaining that the church only cares about money. In fact, the reason for greed, Paul said, is idolatry (Col. 3:5): not merely the idolatry of worshiping money but the idolatry of worshiping self. In contrast to Nabal and the rich fool of Jesus’ parable, while we will want to be prudent in the use of money, we should rejoice at contributing to those in need and especially at an opportunity to befriend and assist the servants of God in the cause of world missions, church planting, and evangelism.

Put yourself in David’s shoes as the report came back from Nabal’s feast. For years now, David had been hunted by Saul. Why? Because God had anointed him as the true king over the people. Meanwhile, David was burdened with the anxiety of feeding his large band of followers and their need must have been pressing. David had labored to restrain his men and respect the local land-owners. Now, having patiently endured threats from the great of the world, like king Saul, he now is forced to endure insults from the low of the world, like Nabal. In the previous chapter, when Saul stumbled into the cave and placed himself at David’s mercy, the young hero responded with grace and faith, even bowing to Saul and pleading his cause once the king had departed from the cave. Now, how will David handle this different challenge, not from the Lord’s anointed but from a man who was so lowly as even to be named “Fool.”

The answer is that David did not respond to this frustration very well at all: “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” (1 Sam. 25:13).

David’s violent reaction offers us a number of significant lessons. First, David fell so easily into sin because he was not on his guard against it. Surely this explains much of the difference between his self-control in the presence of Saul versus his furious passion at the insult from foolish Nabal. We are likewise easily led into sin when we are not expecting a challenge to our character and grace. Peter provided an example of this on the night of Jesus’ arrest. Expecting trouble when Judas arrived with soldiers, Peter was bold in his faithful stand for Jesus. But later that evening, after he had followed Jesus to the high priest’s house, Peter’s guard was down and his faith was easily felled by a question from a serving woman (Jn. 18:10, 17).

Moreover, it is worth noting that David’s ungodly response to Nabal came on the heels of his notable success in sparing king Saul. We tend to respond to spiritual success by relying on ourselves and loosening our dependence on God’s grace through prayer and God’s Word. Once his flesh was unrestrained by reliance on God, David was transformed into just another Saul. Saul reacted to a perceived affront by ordering the death of all the priests at Nob; now David intends to answer Nabal’s insult by slaying all the men of that household (1 Sam. 25:22). A. W. Pink comments:

No man stands a moment longer than divine grace upholds him. The strongest are weak as water immediately the power of the Spirit is withdrawn; the most mature and experienced Christian acts foolishly the moment he be left to himself; none of us has any reserve strength or wisdom in himself to draw from: our source of sufficiency is all treasured up for us in Christ, as as soon as communion with Him be broken, as soon as we cease looking alone to Him, we are helpless.⁵

Finally, David’s reaction makes clear that he had grown to expect a certain amount of respect to be paid to his person and name. It is especially easy for God’s choice servants to develop a prideful concern for their reputation, so that they are easily vexed by the kind of insult that Nabal cast against David. How different was Jesus’

⁵ A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:134.

attitude, having humbled himself to the obedience of the cross, when he was mocked by the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers. Peter writes to believers: “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps... When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

ABIGAIL’S JUDICIOUS EMBASSY

So far, Samuel’s legacy has not been honored very well, either by David or Nabal. This explosive situation brings forth a woman, however, who embodies the very opposite of what her husband exhibits. Abigail was introduced in verse 3 as the wife of Nabal, a woman both “discerning and beautiful.” This godly woman’s wisdom and shining character were sorely tried by what had transpired. News was brought to her by one of the servants:

“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” (1 Sam. 25:14-17).

It tells us much about the affairs in this house that the servant came to Nabal’s wife when a life-and-death matter arose. Whereas the master was so vile that his men could not reason with him, Abigail was approachable and reliable. Gordon Keddie writes: “Abigail looks like the competent wife who had been called upon before to rectify some of her husband’s pig-headedness. Men like that rarely know how much they owe to the faithfulness of their wives.”⁶

Abigail wasted no time in acting to save her husband and family. Some might question her submissiveness, given that she treated with David behind Nabal’s back. But this concern fails to reckon with the

⁶ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 235.

dire threat to their mere survival. Keddie comments: “Wifely submissiveness does not extend to initiating fruitless arguments, still less to potentially suicidal delay.”⁷

Immediately, she directed that supplies be gathered for an offering to David: “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’” (1 Sam. 25:18-19). This offering, sent straight to David, would have alleviated neither his material need nor the offense to his pride. It would, however, signal the good intentions and respect of the one who sent it.

As Abigail drew near to David’s advancing party, the terrain permitted her to hear what David was saying before she was seen. What she heard revealed that things were as bad as they could be, since in his violent passion David now went so far as to vow destruction on Nabal’s house: “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” (1 Sam. 25:22). These were fearful words for Abigail to hear from a man of David’s military reputation, backed by so formidable an armed force. Abigail wasted no time in hastening to David with an embassy of peace, her actions and speech displaying the full depth of her discernment and inner beauty.

We can track Abigail’s appeal to David for restraint in five steps that should be followed by Christians when seeking to turn an aggrieved fellow believer from anger. First, Abigail *humbled herself* in David’s presence: “When Abigail saw David, she hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground” (1 Sam. 25:23). Our culture despises one who will abase himself or herself before a foe, but in God’s kingdom this is a mark of special grace. A. W. Pink comments on Abigail’s humility: “Nabal had insulted [David] as a runaway slave, but his wife owns him as a superior, as her king in the purpose of God.”⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pink, *Life of David*, 1:146.

Second, Abigail *confessed the guilt* of her sin: “She fell at his feet and said, ‘On me alone, my lord, be the guilt’” (1 Sam. 25:24). We might object that it was Nabal, not Abigail, who had wronged David. But as his wife, she owned the sin of her husband and acknowledged it before David. This was not the kind of half-hearted confession so commonly heard today: “I am sorry that you feel the way that you do,” etc. Abigail was sorry not that David was angered but that her husband had offended. Here we see her sterling wisdom, for in this stroke she confronted David not with the guilt of her worthless husband but with the penitence of this beautiful and servant-hearted woman. Nabal had sinned against David in withholding what his services had earned (Dt. 24:15), and reconciliation with David required confession of this sin. So also must we confess sins that stand between us and others if we wish to honor the Lord in godly reconciliation.

Third, Abigail *offered restitution* for the wrong done to David. David had been denied rightful provision, so Abigail brought the food supplies to give him. “Now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord,” she said (1 Sam. 25:27). Equally as important, whereas David had been publicly reviled by Nabal, Abigail makes this up by publicly praising his greatness: “Please forgive the trespass of your servant. 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” (1 Sam. 25:28). The New Testament makes clear that confession of sin is to be accompanied by sincere attempts to redress wrongs. It did not occur to Zacchaeus, for instance, to confess his sins and proclaim his faith in Jesus without adding, “if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Lk. 19:8). Here, Abigail restores David’s honor by making the first pronouncement, apparently as led by the Holy Spirit, of David’s eternal dynasty.

Fourth, Abigail *pled for forgiveness* on David’s part: “Please forgive the trespass of your servant” (1 Sam. 25:28). It was only after she had humbly approached David, confessed the sin of her house, made a sincere effort to redress the sin, and pled for forgiveness, that Abigail, fifth, *appealed to David’s sense of godliness*. When we have

wronged others, we should appeal to them to respond in godly ways, but only after we have confessed any sins committed and acted to make up for harms we have done. Abigail's appeal to David was forceful not only by her actions but by the persuasive power of her words:

Abigail first appealed to David not to respond in kind to the foolish behavior of Nabal: "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" (1 Sam. 25:25-26). In effect, she was warning David not to respond to Nabal by becoming like him, but rather to be grateful for her own restraining ministry, through which the Lord himself had kept David from evil.

Her second appeal picks up on this theme. Instead of acting like godless Nabal, David should act like the servant of the Lord that he was, and especially to exhibit the gracious characteristics of one marked and favored by the Lord. "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 living 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" (1 Sam. 25:29). Was Abigail so skillful as to mention a sling to remind David of his victory through faith over Goliath? Probably, she was. Furthermore, she continues, David will be grateful in years to come that he took Abigail's advice and foreswore his bloody vengeance: "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" (1 Sam. 25:30-31). Arthur Pink summarizes: "She pleaded with David that he would let his coming glory regulate his present actions, so that in that day, his conscience would not reproach him for previous follies." Pink applies this truth to us: "If we kept more

before us the judgment-seat of Christ, surely our conduct would be more regulated thereby.”⁹

With these skillful words, Abigail turned David’s heart from his murderous rage, so that he accepted her gift and replied with words of peace. God’s grace was with David so that he was willing not only to grant forgiveness but repent of his own foolish and unbelieving plans. He shows us that ungodly vows should be humbly repented of rather than stubbornly kept. “Herein are the children of God made manifest; they are tractable, open to conviction, willing to be shown their faults; but the children of the devil are like Nabal – churlish, stubborn, proud, unbending.”¹⁰ If we, like David are willing to receive godly appeals from wise and faithful voices like Abigail’s, we will avoid the ill effects of much folly and will be spared many regrets that would plague us in later life.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ABIGAIL

Abigail’s wise approach to David not only averted disaster. Her actions also remind us of the gospel of salvation that comes to us upon the path of unbelief, sin, and destruction. Like Abigail, Jesus came into our midst in a humble manner. Paul writes that being “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). Then, like innocent Abigail taking Nabal’s sin onto herself, Jesus took up our sins to bear them before God. “All we like sheep have gone astray;” Isaiah foretold, “we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). Not only this, but Jesus offered to God what was due to him from us, namely, a perfect life of obedience to the law. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf, and presents his righteousness to God for us, not unlike Abigail presenting David with the provisions owed to him by Nabal. Thus, Paul says, “by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). Finally, as Abigail appealed for forgiveness and directed David to a godly response, Jesus seeks our justification by holding forth the

⁹ Ibid., 1:147.

¹⁰ Ibid.

covenant promises of God: “I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12).

As Abigail saved Nabal from the sinful wrath of David’s anger, Jesus Christ has saved us from the just wrath of the holy God. Let us profit from her gracious example, as David did, but also see in her example a gracious appeal to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.