

Explore the Bible: Protected

July 27, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Aug. 14 focuses on 1 Samuel 25.*

The Fool and the Warlord

David's career as outlaw and king-in-waiting is an incredible series of events. He and his men lived in a variety of wilderness outposts in the caves, ravines and rocky outcroppings of southern Judah. Enemies surrounded them. Saul and the armies of Israel were to the north, often actively hunting David. The Philistines were to the west, an ever-present threat. Moab lay east, and the Negev desert to the south. With every action David took, whether saving an Israelite village from Philistine invasion (1 Samuel 23) or sparing Saul when he was extremely vulnerable (1 Samuel 24), there always was a clear danger. Yet, David was under another danger at this stage of his life that was less obvious. His choices in this crisis time would determine his reputation for the future, when he trusted God's plan to install him as king eventually would occur. The uncertainty of the future is highlighted at the beginning of the chapter with the report of Samuel's death (1 Samuel 25:1). The last judge of Israel set in motion the events that would change Israel's identity forever. In the meantime, the kind of king David would become would be shaped by what kind of leader he was when he seemed the furthest from the throne.

With that grand destiny yet far in the future, the conflict between David's men and the wealthy Nabal might seem relatively mundane. After Nabal and Abigail are introduced, the narrator lays out a sequence of events through David's messengers' speech delivered to Nabal. The shepherds protecting Nabal's thousands of livestock occupied the same pastureland David and his men used as a base. While there, the 600 fighting men under David's command did not help themselves to the movable feast outside.

This report is confirmed by one of Nabal's servants later in the chapter as well (1 Samuel 25:15-16), with an additional detail that David's men, in fact, protected the shepherds from any other harm.

David's request for supplies comes to Nabal at the sheep-shearing time, a time of feasting and revelry. He is, in manner of speaking, a neighbor asking to come to the party, or at least to have some of the party sent his way. Extravagant hospitality was and is highly valued in the Middle East. David had provided Nabal's servants with such hospitality as he could as an outlaw militia commander. He had every reason to expect Nabal to respond with generosity. Nabal's reputation as the Scrooge of Israel ("surly and mean in his dealings," the narrator tells us in 1 Samuel 25:3), was confirmed in his response.

Nabal's dismissal of David's request is a direct insult to David and an expression of pure selfishness. Nabal does not accuse David of running a protection racket. This was not David's intent in his request, but that kind of misconstrual of the request at least would be understandable. Instead, Nabal's questions (Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse?) are, in fact, a way of clearly saying David is nobody. Nabal calls him a servant broken away from his master, in essence, a runaway slave. His final question is a clear statement, "What's mine is mine, and it will stay that way" (1 Samuel 25:10-11).

David's request was gracious and respectful, honoring to Nabal, eloquent and undemanding. Nabal answered with a series of sarcastic questions intended to give insult. David's response now is blunt and literally to the point—"Put on your swords!" With this statement, David started on a path that could have destroyed him. He consulted God repeatedly before fighting the Philistines (1 Samuel 23:1-4); he cited God's anointing of Saul as a reason he would not harm him (1 Samuel 24:6). Here, God is left out of the deliberation. David has been insulted, and Nabal and his whole household will pay with their lives. David undoubtedly would have won the

“battle.” But he would have lost the war. He rode out of his camp on the path to being another petty warlord in a landscape full of petty warlords and not a man after God’s own heart.

Abigail’s Gambit

Standing between David and utter ruin is Abigail. Abigail stands in the pantheon of Biblical women who act decisively on their own initiative. Described at the beginning of the chapter as “intelligent and beautiful,” once she receives the report of Nabal’s insult to David, she perceives the threat and rushes into a flurry of action. She provisions a second feast and makes it mobile. She has done what Nabal refused to do and shared from his great wealth. Now, though, the gift of food is not a gesture of hospitality but a peace offering.

She meets David as he is rehearsing Nabal’s insult and his own righteousness. The first mention of God in the chapter occurs as David calls down a curse upon himself if he does not murder all the males of Nabal’s household by morning.

Abigail’s speech is a masterful piece of oratory. Even as she stands in an incredibly vulnerable position between a force of invading guerrillas and their target, she first puts Nabal in his place and then does the same to David. She asks David to dismiss Nabal’s insult as one more foolish thing done by a foolish man. She asks forgiveness, implying that if she had been there to greet the messengers instead, things would have been different. Her next stroke is one of genius. She delivers a sharp critique of David’s murderous plans in the form of a prayer of blessing. She deftly confronts David’s own unrighteous actions by presenting them as something David *already* has decided not to do, and for that repentance he will be blessed. She couches her speech in terms of God saving David from his enemies. In fact, she is imploring him not to ruin his reputation by enacting brutal vengeance and bloodshed. Oh, and by the way, here is the food you asked

for.

Abigail is first in this narrative to speak of God outside the context of a curse. Her perspective is that Yahweh has kept David from bloodshed (a hope she speaks of as a certainty), and Yahweh will make fools of David's enemies. She declares with striking imagery that Yahweh will protect David's life from those who seek it ("bound securely in the bundle of the living") and throw away his enemies' lives ("hurled away as from the pocket of a sling"). She declares Yahweh will grant him success and even "a lasting dynasty" (1 Samuel 25:26-31). This last blessing resulted in Abigail's reputation in Jewish tradition as a prophetess, but this is not explicitly stated in Scripture. Her blessings are best understood as a boldly prophetic call to David, literally in the middle of the path he was taking to commit a great sin, for him to remember who he was called to be, and to remember the God who called him.

Abigail's gamble worked. David's response to her is praise to God and blessing her for her good judgment. David could have added courage, kindness and faithfulness to the list, as well.

Resolution

The resolution of the story is recounted rapidly. Nabal's sheep-shearing party has proceeded without any regard for the local warlord. There was plenty to go around, and Nabal became very drunk. In the morning, while he must have been nursing a massive hangover, Abigail informs him she went over his head and saved all of their lives yesterday from an invading militia. Nabal has a heart attack on the spot, lingers for 10 days, and then Yahweh declares his time is up.

David then marries Abigail. Whatever modern romantic notions we might bring to the narrative must be at least partially disrupted by the report that Abigail is now his third wife. The practice of polygamy was common among

tribal leaders and persons of great wealth and importance. It is worth noting, however, there is no family in Scripture in which there is more than one wife where there is not also significant family strife that threatens and often leads directly to tragedy. David's multiple marriages will be no exception.

In spite of that reality, Yahweh used Abigail's courage and wisdom to save David from a great burden. David was saved from the "staggering burden," to use Abigail's magnificent phrase, of "needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself" (1 Samuel 25:31). Vengeance may seem to us in an unredeemed world as a right or a necessity. It is, in fact, a staggering burden. Nabal repaid David evil for good. But for David to repay evil for evil would have led him far from where God intended him to be. Thank God for the courageous people who call us out when we are acting out of pride, selfishness or vengeance. God has a higher road he intends his servants to walk—the road walked by the Son of David, Jesus Christ.