

1 Samuel 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 25 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. 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.

[1:01] Therefore let my young men find favour 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.

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. 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. 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.

[2:13] 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. Then Abigail made haste, and took two hundred loaves, and two skins of wine, and five sheep already prepared, and five sears 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. 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. 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. Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow Nabal.

[3:30] 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 blood guilt, 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.

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, 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 living, in the care of the lord your guard, and the lives of your enemies he shall sling out, as from the hollow of a sling.

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 working salvation himself.

And when the lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant. And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the lord, the god of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me.

[4 : 50] Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from blood guilt, and from working salvation 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. 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. 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.

[6 : 10] 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. David also took Ahinoam of Jezreel, and both of them became his wives. Saul had given Michael, his daughter, David's wife, to Palti, the son of Laish, who was of Galim.

1 Samuel chapter 25 opens with the death of Samuel. The father figure has now died, but the rivalry of the two sons has not ended. It's very easy to read this chapter as if it were merely the latest standalone episode in the continuing adventures of David, not considering how it ties in with the larger picture.

The first thing to notice on that front is that this is the middle of three stories in succession of David drawing back from vengeance. Two times with Saul, and this time with Nabal, David comes the closest to executing vengeance for himself in this chapter.

He is on his way to destroy Nabal and his men when the wise Abigail intercepts him. Why of all the events that occurred during David's time in the wilderness has this one been recorded for us?

[7 : 21] Perhaps it's because there is an association between Nabal and Saul. The characterization of Nabal is important. He is described as exceptionally rich. He feasts like a king in verse 36.

He has 3,000 sheep. Saul in the preceding and the following chapter comes with 3,000 chosen men. In verse 36, he feasts like a king.

However, he's characterized as a fool. His name means fool, and he is also described as such by his servants and his wife. David acts faithfully on behalf of Nabal, as he did for Saul, but is thanklessly mistreated by him.

Both men return evil for David's good. There are further things we should notice as we look more closely at this passage. David cares for Nabal's flocks, much as Jacob cared for Laban's flocks.

Much like Laban, however, Nabal is an ungracious man. He treats David unjustly, even though he has helped him to build up his house. The association between Laban and Nabal can also be seen in their names.

[8 : 21] Nabal, in Hebrew as in English, is Laban backwards. The events occur at the time of sheep-shearing, and Nabal speaks of servants who break away from their masters. Jacob's flight from Laban was at the time of sheep-shearing.

In David and Nabal, we see a pairing that reminds us of Jacob and Laban. However, we've also seen another character in the story who reminds us of Laban, and that is Saul.

Saul is like Laban in the way that he tricks his son-in-law concerning his daughters. Saul, like Laban, is deceived by his daughter with teraphim. Saul takes on the characteristics of Laban, the wicked father-in-law.

All of this invites us to read the story of David and Nabal as a commentary on the story of David and Saul, and a commentary on that story in terms of the parallels between David and Jacob and Saul and Laban.

But there is a twist in this particular story. If we remember the story of Jacob fleeing from Laban, after he finally settles matters with Laban and moves on, he faces another threat coming towards him, Esau with his 400 men.

[9 : 28] Esau is there seeking vengeance. He has lost the birthright and the blessing to his brother Jacob, and now it seems that he is finally going to get his own back. However, Jacob sends on a wave of gifts ahead of him to Esau to pacify him.

Returning to 1 Samuel chapter 25, in the light of this background, we notice something surprising. David, who seemed like Jacob at the beginning of the story, Jacob, who was thanklessly treated by the Laban character, Jacob, who broke away from his master at the time of sheep-sharing, David, as Jacob, now turns into David as Esau.

David, like Esau, comes with 400 men to get vengeance for himself. In reading the story of David in the books of Samuel, we need to notice this background in the story of Genesis, the story of Jacob, Esau, and Laban.

And the way that the characters play off each other. There is no simple this equals that association between the characters of Genesis and the characters of Samuel. Rather, we see the characters in the book of Samuel taking on features and traits of various characters from the story of Genesis. So at certain points, Saul is like Isaac. He's the father who will not give the blessing to the right son. He's the father figure in the darkness. He's also like Laban, as we have seen.

[10 : 42] Saul is perhaps most powerfully associated with the character of Esau. Esau. He's the one who despises the blessing and the birthright. He's the one who tries to kill his brother.

In certain episodes, we also see more specific associations, such as his lifting up his voice and weeping, as Esau did when he lost the blessing. Jonathan, for his part, is also like Esau, but Esau who reconciled with his brother and made peace with him.

David throughout is most typically Jacob, but yet at other points, we see him take on the characteristics of Esau, both positive and negative. Like Esau, he is described as ruddy. He's a man of the field, a man who's gifted in battle, a man who's integrated many of the traits and gifts of Esau, the brother of Jacob, bringing together those two characters in a positive way. However, there is an ambivalence to that character, the character of Esau, and here in this chapter, we see some of that. The vengeance of Esau is expressed in David's attempt to execute vengeance for himself against Nabal.

[11 : 43] And what happens? There's an interception, and the interception is provided by Abigail. Abigail is this wise woman, her wisdom contrasting with the folly of her husband, whose name means foolish.

In this story, she plays the part of Jacob. She is the one who sends the waves of gifts ahead and restores David to his Jacob-ness. There are other things going on in this story.

It's an artfully told narrative. There are several occasions in the story of Jacob and of Judah, his son, and his ancestors that involve the time of sheep-shearing and that involve some dimension of the verb parats.

The first occurs in Genesis chapter 30, where Jacob's property increases greatly during his time with Laban. Jacob then leaves Laban at the time of sheep-shearing.

A few chapters later, the story of Judah and Tamar involves sheep-shearing again. It's at the time of sheep-shearing that Judah has his relations with Tamar. And then later on in the story, the verb *parats* occurs in the context of the breaking through of Perez, who receives his name on account of that verb.

[12:48] Beyond the story in 1 Samuel 25, the story of 2 Samuel chapter 13 with Absalom and Tamar involves Absalom pressing David to attend a festival at the time of sheep-shearing, once again using the verb *parats*.

This particular set of associations is something pointed out by Jeffrey Gagin. It suggests that in this story, associated with the other stories, we're seeing something of the destiny of Jacob and Judah his son playing itself out.

The characterisation of Nabal is important in other ways. He is a fool. He's also described in a way that associates him with dogs. He is a Calebite. Caleb means dog.

David talks about killing all of those who piss against the wall, like a dog does. It's translated in most translations as male, but the euphemism is not accidentally or arbitrarily chosen.

As Peter Lightheart has noted in an article Nabal and his wine, Abigail relays the news to Nabal as the wine is going out of him, suggesting that he is in the process of urinating.

[13:52] In the preceding chapter, David cut off a corner of Saul's robe while he was covering his feet, another euphemism for defecating. We should be alert to such parallels.

In seeking to destroy the foolish Nabal, the man like Laban, the man like Saul, David becomes at risk of losing himself, of giving in to some dark shadow side of his personality, the Esau side that would reduce him to a vengeful warlord.

From Genesis chapter 35 and 6 onwards, subtle associations between Benjamin and Esau have been explored at many points, and we see these come to their head in the character of Saul, who takes, as we have noticed, Esau-like characteristics on many occasions.

David, however, is not immune to these things. He could also become like his enemy. In opposing Saul, Esau, he could become like both Esau and Saul. This is, of course, one of the great dangers of vengeance.

In vengeance, we can easily become the twin of the person we are seeking vengeance against. We mirror them, we become like them, just as David almost becomes a Saul or Esau-like character here.

[15:01] It requires a Jacob-like character, Abigail, the wise woman, to bring David back to his Jacob-ness, back to his senses, back to his true destiny and calling and identity.

And had it not been for Abigail, David would have had blood guilt upon his hands. His attempt to seek vengeance against Nabal is, in the context, associated with the temptation to take vengeance upon Saul and in the process to become like Saul himself.

Had David obtained his throne through violence and vengeance against his predecessor Saul, his kingdom would have been compromised at the very foundation. Abigail's actions here, in drawing David back from the brink, need then to be read in terms of the larger story, in terms of what is happening between David and Saul.

David must not try to work salvation for himself. The Lord will do so for him. And in the destruction of the fearful fool Nabal, we have a foreshadowing of what will happen with Saul.

And the symbolism could be extended. After the death of Nabal, the wife of Nabal becomes the wife of David. When Saul, the bridegroom of Israel, dies, it will be David who becomes the husband of the nation.

[16:12] Of course, there is another level on which we should read this story. We should observe that David is falling into the trap of polygamy, something that will cause him and his son great trouble in the future.

A question to consider. Reflecting upon the counsel of Abigail to David, how would the character of David's kingdom have changed had he taken vengeance upon Nabal and Saul?