

David and Abigail

I Samuel 25
David H. Roper

There is a teaching of Scripture which, at best, is very confusing to Christian women, and to some is downright challenging - the concept of submission to husbands. It is pretty difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Scriptures teach that within the sphere of the home the husband is to be the leader and the wife the follower. She is to be responsive and submissive to his authority. With the advent of the feminist movement, that pattern, along with other traditional values, is being attacked and discredited.

This concept is usually very confusing to women. It is somewhat softened by the fact that in the New Testament there is also the command to husbands that they are to lead their wives after the example of Christ himself. The leadership they exert is not to be tyrannical, not to achieve their own will, but it is to accomplish the will of God on behalf of their wives. It is also good to know that men themselves are under authority. None of us can ad-lib our way through life without being responsible to some authority. Men are responsible to various spheres of authority - to government, to their employer, and ultimately to the Lord himself. As the Scriptures say, "We are not our own; we are bought with a price."

A week or so ago I was driving through the hills to Pescadero quite early in the morning when I saw a hitchhiker with long hair and coveralls standing out in the fog. I stopped, he got into the car, and I discovered that he was a girl! Ordinarily I don't pick up girls. In fact, the whole idea of girls' hitchhiking scares me to death! But now that she was in the car I couldn't very well throw her out. We drove a little distance, and she told me she was a housekeeper in a home in Los Altos, but she lived up in the mountains. I commented on my own desire to live in the mountains some day. She said, "Why don't you do it?" I explained that I wasn't free to do it right now. She was very gentle about it, but she clearly expressed her feeling that I was too tied down to my home and job.

I said to her, "You know, there's a principle found in the Bible: 'You are not your own; you are bought with a price.' And because I'm a Christian I really don't have the right to do as I please; I want to do what the Lord wants me to do. I've found that true freedom, true liberty, lies in doing what the Lord wants. And I've learned through some very bitter experiences that if I don't do that, life can get pretty grim indeed."

She looked at me as though I had just dropped in from outer space! I went on to say that I wasn't alone in this, but that this is the way Christians look at life. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. We don't have the right to do as we please; we're under authority. We drove on a few hundred yards. Then she asked to be let out. I'm sure she had never encountered anything like that before in her life. But, you see, none of us are free in this sense; we are all under authority. As men, our primary responsibility is to be under the authority of Jesus Christ.

And the Scriptures are very clear that in the realm of the home wives are to be subject to their husbands. The Scriptures do not speak about the leadership of women in the fields of politics or industry or the arts-that is outside the perimeter of biblical concern. But the home is very much a matter of concern in the Scripture, and it is in that area that women are to be subject to their husbands. Now, that is a hard concept, and one which is much under attack today. And women wonder, because the concept is so clearly spelled out in Scripture, what their place is to be in the home. They are to be a helpmate, but what does that mean? What part can they play in their husband's life? Are they to be servile, always quiet, never having any part in the growth and development of their husbands? Is this true also of Christian sisters in general? Can they have any ministry to their Christian brothers? Yes, they can!

The Scriptures are very helpful in this regard. There are two passages in the Old Testament which I find particularly helpful. One is Proverbs 31, and the other is 1 Samuel 25. As you know, David's story is told in 1 and 2 Samuel. 2 Samuel is the book of David's reign. It describes his experiences as king from the time he was crowned at Hebron until he died some forty years later. 1 Samuel is the book of preparation for David's reign. It was a time when he learned some very hard lessons.

It is divided into three periods. Chapters 16 and 17 describe David's experience as a shepherd. Chapter 16 tells us of David's secret anointing by Samuel at Bethlehem. Chapter 17 tells of his encounter with Goliath, which we studied a few weeks ago as the crucial point in David's life during this period (**Catalog No.3055**). Chapters 18 through 20 describe his life in Saul's court. The pivotal experience there was Jonathan's friendship with David, which made up our last study (**Catalog No.3056**). Chapters 21 through 31 describe David's exile as he was fleeing from Saul. The turning point in David's life during that period was effected by a woman whose name was Abigail. Her story, along with that of Nabal her husband, and David, is given to us in chapter 25. The setting is provided in verse 1.

Then Samuel died; and all Israel gathered together and mourned for him, and buried him at his house in Ramah. And David arose and went down to the wilderness of Paran.

Samuel's death and David's flight to the wilderness of Paran are linked together, as though one were caused by the other. Samuel had been David's confidant and counselor, the one to whom he had gone in times of need, probably the only person in Israel who would stand against Saul. When Samuel died, David realized that his last hope for reconciliation with Saul was gone. He fled from Engedi, along the coast of the Dead Sea, because it was too close for comfort to Saul's headquarters. He fled south to the wilderness of Paran, the area in the northern part of the Sinai peninsula where the nation of Israel had wandered for thirty-eight years. As he flees south the story of Abigail and Nabal takes place:

Now there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel; and the man was very rich, and he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. And it came about while he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. Now the man's name was Nabal, and his wife's name was Abigail. And the woman was intelligent and beautiful in appearance, but the man was harsh and evil in his dealings, and he was a Calebite, that 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, visit Nabal and greet him in my name; and thus you shall say, 'Have a long life [L'chaim! - if you remember *Fiddler On The Roof*], peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have. And now I have heard that you have shearers; now your shepherds have been with us and we have not insulted them nor have they missed anything all the days they were in Carmel. Ask your young men and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we have come on a festive day. Please give whatever you find at hand to your servants and to your son David.' "

This paragraph tells us two things. First, it tells us something of the character of the people involved in the story. Abigail is described here as a beautiful and intelligent woman. She was evidently raised in a very secure home, for her name means "the joy of my father." She was probably so named because she was the delight of her father. But somewhere along the line she had become married to Nabal, this churlish individual who is described here as a harsh man (the Hebrew word means hard, unyielding, unbending, unteachable) and evil in his dealings, i.e., he was a crooked businessman. He was very wealthy, but he had achieved his wealth through unethical means. He was a hard man to live with, unapproachable, intractable, unteachable.

The author says he was a Calebite, and I wondered why he would say that about Nabal. Caleb was one of the twelve spies who went into the promised land with Joshua, the only one who stood with Joshua in his favorable report, a worthy old warrior who was such a man of faith that I wondered why he was linked with Nabal. Then I remembered that the word "caleb" means "dog." This is another of those subtle ways the Jews had of attributing certain characteristics to people. Nabal was dog like shameless in his behavior. But the real key to the man's character is his own name, Nabal, which in Hebrew means "fool." He was a fool.

Now, in the Scriptures a fool is not necessarily a man who acts ignorantly or foolishly, as we use that term. He is a man who has rejected the truth about God. As you read Proverbs you discover that there are only two kinds of people in the world: wise men, and fools. Wise men are people who respond to the truth of God in obedience. They fear God and they let the truth live in their lives. Therefore they are wise. It has nothing to do with their intelligence or education; it is a moral issue. They are wise because they behave according to the truth. But a fool is a man who has rejected the truth. That is why the Psalmist says, "The fool has said in his heart 'There is no God.' " It is not an intellectual issue; it is a moral issue. He had not made room for God in his heart. In the thirty-second chapter of Isaiah there is a description of the fool:

For a fool speaks nonsense, And his heart inclines toward wickedness, To practice ungodliness and to speak error against the lord.

A fool is a man who practices ungodliness. That was Nabal. You couldn't tell him anything; you couldn't teach him; he wouldn't listen. He didn't want to hear the truth of God, didn't want to abide by it. So he is called Nabal, the fool.

Secondly, this paragraph tells us something of David's request of Nabal. It occurred during the time when they were shearing sheep. Groups of men who were professional sheep shearers traveled throughout Palestine and would shear sheep for people who owned flocks. It was always a festive occasion, much like our harvest times in the Midwest. People would gather from all over, a huge table was spread, and rich provision was made for the workers. It was a time when hospitality was expected, and David was asking no more than would be normally expected during this time - that Nabal extend hospitality to him.

David had a number of young men who followed him. In chapter 22 we are told that when he left the court of Saul there were young men who were in distress, in debt, and discontented, who gathered to him and followed him. They were revolutionaries, angry young men who could easily have become a gang of bandits. They followed David because they loved him. And David's concern was to provide for these men, now grown six-hundred-strong. They didn't have sufficient provisions, and so David asked of Nabal that he supply their needs. Note Nabal's response:

When David's young men came, they spoke to Nabal according to all these words in David's name; then they waited. But Nabal answered David's servants, and said, "Who is David? And who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are each breaking away from his

master. [That is, David is just one more runaway slave. I owe him nothing!] Shall I then take my bread and my wa ter and my meat that I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men whose origin I do not know?" So David's young men retraced their way and went back; and they came and told him according to all these words. And David said to his men, "Each of you gird on his sword." So each man girded on his sword. And David also girded on his sword, and about four hundred men went up behind David while two hundred stayed with the baggage.

Nabal ridiculed the messengers, they went back to David and recounted the story to him, and David was enraged! He grabbed his sword, called to his followers to get theirs, and they were all too eager to comply. They were going to kill Nabal and his whole family. This is so typical of David. David at this point in his life was a man driven by his passions. This was his problem throughout life. He did not have the presumptuousness of Saul, nor Solomon's tendency to magnify himself and be a despot. David's problem was that he was impetuous, driven by strong passions. At one moment he could be the sweet singer of Israel, and the next moment he was going to break somebody's head! Angry, frustrated, he was going out to secure his own rights.

This, of course, is what was wrong in David's actions. It is not wrong to be angry when someone else's rights are at stake. It was right when David said of Goliath, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should frustrate the armies of the living God?" He was right, in that instance, because it was God's honor that was at stake. But he was not right in saying, "Who is this Nabal, that he should frustrate me?" He was fighting for his own rights. His indignation and anger were unrighteous. And he was headed into a situation which could have destroyed him. It certainly would have marred his conscience to the end of his days. Verses 14 through 17:

But one of the young men [i.e., one of Nabal's shepherd] told Abigail, Nabal's wife, saying, "Behold, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, and he scorned them. Yet they were very good to us, and we were not insulted, nor we miss anything as long as we went about with them, while we were in the fields. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the time we were with them tending the sheep. Now therefore know and consider what you should do, for evil is plotted against our master and against all his household; and he is such a worthless man that no one can speak to him."

Literally, he calls him a "son of Belial" - a lawless man. "No one can tell him anything," he says. "Do something, or we're all going to lose our lives." We read in verses 18 through 20 that Abigail took some provisions, loaded them on donkeys and rode out to meet David and his men. Verses 21 and 22:

Now David had said, "Surely in vain I have guarded all that this man has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; and he has returned me evil for good. May God do so to the enemies of David, and more also, if by morning I leave as much as one male of any who belong to him."

If you want to sense what David's frame of mind was at this point, note King James translation of his passage or the marginal reading in the New American Standard Version. David was really angry, unreasonably angry, muttering to himself as he and his men were traveling to where Nabal lived. But Abigail intercepts him with her gift.

And she fell at his feet and said, "On me alone, my lord, be the blame. And please let your maidservant speak to you, and listen to the words of your maidservant. Please do not let my lord pay attention to this worthless man, Nabal, for as his name is, so 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. Now therefore, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, since the Lord has restrained you from shedding blood, and from avenging yourself by your own hand, now then let your enemies, and those who seek evil against my lord, be as Nabal. And now let this gift which your maidservant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who accompany my lord. Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant; for the Lord will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord, and evil shall not be found in you all your days. And should anyone rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, then the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the Lord your God . . ."

That is quite a statement! It is found on many tombstones of ancient Judah: "May the life of my lord be bound in the bundle of the living with the Lord your God." May your life be bound up with the Lord's life. Verses 30 and 31:

And it shall come about when the Lord shall do for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and shall appoint you ruler over Israel, that this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to my lord, both by having shed blood without cause and by my lord having avenged himself [or, literally, having saved himself. When the Lord shall deal well with my lord, then remember your maidservant."

This is quite a speech that Abigail makes. In essence she is saying, "David, you're wrong." In fact she says, "David, what you are doing is evil. You're trying to save yourself, trying to avenge yourself. You're trying to seek your own rights, and what you're doing is not right. When you become king this will haunt you, it will live in your conscience to the end of your days. You see, David, your life is bound up with the life of God. The battle that you are fighting is God's battle; the life that you're living is God's life. And God will take care of his own. You don't need to fight yourself, and you don't need to defend yourself; God will defend you. Let him. Don't take vengeance on your enemies, let God take vengeance." That is quite a strong rebuke - coming from an unknown woman to a man who is soon to be king of Israel! She is saying to David exactly what Paul says in Romans 12:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That is God's way. It is not the wrath of man which accomplished the righteousness of God. "Let God defend you, David. He will take care of you. Your life is bound up with him. Don't defend yourself. To defend yourself is an evil thing." Those are strong words of exhortation and correction addressed to David. She was speaking according to the truth.

But will you note the manner in which these words are addressed? Because how one says it is as important as what one has to say. This strong rebuke directed at David is couched in terms which are gentle. She bows herself before David. She is not trying to dominate him. She is not coming across in harsh and strident terms, not berating him, not screaming at him. There is gentleness and quietness of spirit. And at least twice she says, "David, forgive my transgression." Now, she is not saying that Nabal's transgression is her own. She is not identifying herself with Nabal's sin. She is saying, "David, I don't want to overstep myself. Forgive me for saying what I have to say, but it has to be said."

And so she says these hard things, but she says them with love and tenderness and gentleness, and out of a spirit of concern for David. I'm sure she was concerned for Nabal. When word came to her that Nabal and his household were threatened, she had a concern for Nabal. But in her words to David she indicates a concern for him also: "David, when you become king you don't want this on your conscience. It's an evil thing that you're doing; don't do it." It was out of love and consideration for him. It wasn't a desire to seek her own will and get her own way, but rather to see David become the king that God intended him to be.

And this is the kind of ministry that Christian sisters ought to have in the lives of Christian brothers, be they husbands or other Christian men. It is a ministry of encouragement, even of exhortation at times. God intends us to reign, as God intended David to reign, and we all need help in learning how to reign. David needed to learn how to restrain himself in situations such as this, and Abigail came at a time when her ministry in his life was needed. She taught him, but she did it in a spirit of gentleness and quietness, and out of a love for him. Note David's reaction:

Then David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me, and blessed be your discernment, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodshed, and from avenging myself by my own hand. Nevertheless, as the Lord God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from harming you, unless you had come quickly to meet me, surely there would not have been left to Nabal until the morning light as much as one male. "So David received from her hand what she had brought him, and he said to her, "Go up to your house in peace. See, I have listened to you and granted your request."

First, David listened to her. He took it. He knew he was wrong. He saw where his impetuosity was carrying him. The thing which distinguishes David from Nabal is that Nabal did not listen. Nabal was a fool. I'm sure that Abigail had tried many times to encourage him in the same way, but he did not listen. You see, it is sometimes difficult for men to listen to the exhortation of a Christian sister. Because of our stubbornness and pride, we are fools. We don't want to hear. But David listened, and he allowed the Lord to use this truth to correct his life.

The second thing to note is that Abigail's ministry to David turned David's eyes to the Lord. He says, in sequence, "Blessed is the Lord, blessed is your discernment, and blessed are you." Her ministry was to get David's eyes on the Lord - off himself and his own anger and his own resources, and onto the Lord, who would take care of him. And while he could have praised her for many things, not the least of which were her intelligence and beauty, he didn't say a word about them. She had turned his attention to the Lord. She had caused him to praise the Lord. And notice what he does praise about her. It is not her beauty, not her intelligence; it is her discernment, her understanding of God's principles. We read in Proverbs 3 1,

**Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.**

That is what evokes praise from a man. A wife or a Christian sister who knows the Lord and knows his word is able to use it in a

discerning way in the life of her husband, to help him grow to maturity. That is what David praised about Abigail - her discernment. In its characteristic way, Proverbs says,

**As a ring of gold in a swine's snout,
So is a beautiful woman without discernment.**

That is the same Hebrew term for discernment you find here in this story. There is something very incongruous about a gold ring in a pig's nose. And there is something very incongruous about a beautiful woman without spiritual discernment. But David saw that Abigail was a woman of the Word. She was discerning. She could lead him to a higher knowledge of God, a greater understanding and appreciation of the character of God. He praises the Lord because of it, and he praises her because of her discernment.

There is another thing we need to notice here. In verse 22 David thanks the Lord and thanks Abigail because he has been kept back from bloodshed and from saving himself. Then in verse 34 he mentions that the Lord God of Israel has restrained him from harming both her and her household. David was restrained. He learned at this point, I believe, to let the Lord control him. He recognized that he wasn't free to do as he pleased. He couldn't run amok, he couldn't redress the things which had been done against him. He had to count on the Lord, and the Lord disciplined and restrained and controlled him. And for David, that was the most valuable lesson he could learn, because he could not reign as a king until he had learned to let God reign in his own life. He learned this lesson from Abigail, and I believe that this was a pivotal point in David's life.

There is a fourth thing I want you to notice. In the last part of verse 35 David says, "I have listened to you and granted your request." The Hebrew says, "I have lifted up your face." I believe David is saying here that he has exalted her, given her a place of exaltation. You see, the requirement of submission can be very galling. It can be seen as demeaning servilely. But it doesn't have to be that at all. When women take their God-given place in a man's life, are discerning in the Word, and use that Word to help him grow, and do it all in gentleness and meekness, it becomes an exalting experience for them when he responds to the truth. It is fulfilling, makes their life meaningful, takes them off the shelf and puts them in a place where they can be of use in the lives of their Christian brothers to help them be what God intends them to be. And when David responded to Abigail it lifted up her countenance in joy and a sense of exaltation.

There may be some question about Abigail's attitude toward her husband. Was she subject to her husband in circumventing him and speaking to David? It is probable that Abigail was ignorant of the full range of truth about submission to her husband. We need to be careful about judging her actions by the more complete revelation of this truth in the New Testament.

Her actions were similar to Sarah's when she allowed herself to be placed in Pharaoh's harem though she was Abraham's wife. Sarah was unaware of any wrongdoing. In fact, she is commended in 1 Peter 3 because she took her action in obedience to Abraham. Her action, judged by the New Testament, was clearly wrong. But she, of course, did not have this additional word on the matter.

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[Back to home Page](#)

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