

Kept from Bloodshed - 1 Samuel 25

Date: 9 July 2023, 5th ordinary Sunday

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Searching for a King - 1 Samuel

Texts: 1 Samuel 25, (Romans 12:9-21)

Anger is one of our most powerful emotions. There are times when anger is right and justified. You see injustice, abuse, someone threatening the safety of your kids and anger moves you to action, to step in. But even in a situation of righteous anger, anger is so powerful it can overwhelm us, make us lose control. The apostle Paul recognises this tension when he says in Ephesians, “in your anger do not sin”.¹ So often though when we get angry it is not for righteous reasons, but because our will has been thwarted or our pride injured. I think this is something all parents know. You're tired at the end of a long day. You want your children to put their toys away, eat their dinner, clean their teeth, and your kids come up with every possible excuse to not do what you say. Your blood starts to boil and you end up shouting and things end in tears and you've got to say sorry and patch things up. It's not that what you want your kids to do is selfish or wrong. No, it's for their good. But the anger comes from you not getting your way, and that is selfish. As Claire reminds me, who is meant to be the emotionally mature person in this situation? Or maybe that's just me.

We're continuing our series in 1 Samuel, and we're picking up the story in chapter 25. David is on the run from king Saul who wants his head. And yet despite fleeing for his life, when David catches Saul, literally with his pants down, relieving himself in a cave where David is hiding, David shows great restraint and does not kill him. He says to Saul, “I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the LORD's anointed... May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you.”² But now in chapter 25, David's restraint gives way to revenge. Our text today looks at wounded pride, anger, and how God is still providentially at work through human agents to bring about his purposes, and so we can trust him and not respond to evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. So let's have a look together.

Wounded Pride 1-22

The chapter opens with the death of Samuel. It's almost a footnote as the focus of the story has moved to Saul and David. We're then introduced to the 2 other main characters in this chapter, the wealthy but churlish Nabal, and his wise and beautiful wife Abigail. It's the season for shearing sheep and David sends some of his lads to ask Nabal if they can share in the festive season. It turns out that David and his men have been protecting Nabal's vast flock. As Abigail's servant later says, “Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them.”³ David tells the lads to open their speech to Nabal with the most elaborate greeting in the Bible. He wishes Nabal

¹ Ephesians 4:26

² 1 Samuel 24.10, 12

³ 1 Samuel 25.16

shalom three times. Nabal however throws the greeting, the protection and the polite request for food back in David's face.

'Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. 11 Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?'

Nabal of course knows exactly who David is: in his eyes a servant who has broken away from his master Saul.

When David's men report back to David he is furious. Where he had wished *shalom*, peace three times on Nabal, now he wishes the sword. Verse 13 literally reads in the Hebrew,

David said to his men, "Every man, strap on your sword!" And every man strapped on his sword, and David too strapped on his sword.

In verse 21 David says,

'It's been useless – all my watching over this fellow's property in the wilderness so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. 22 May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!'

Actually, it's more crude than that. The final line literally reads,

May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive a single *pisser against the wall* of all who belong to him!'

The language is deliberately coarse. It's an expression of David's rage, and also reminds us of the bride price of 200 foreskins that David earlier paid for Michal, Saul's daughter. Will Nabal and his household become like the Philistines? David fought against them as the enemies of God and his people, but here he is set against Nabal because of the personal insult. The great restraint David has shown towards Saul in front of the nation has given way to private murderous revenge over wounded pride. Yes, Nabal has paid back David's good with evil. But will David repay evil with evil?

It's a temptation we all face when our will is thwarted, when we're insulted, when someone doesn't do what we want, maybe especially if they are less powerful than us, to punish; to use force with our words or hands; to repay our perceived evil with evil; and to justify ourselves by saying, "I'm tired. I'm under pressure. I'm owed. They deserve it."

Wise Intervention 23-31

While David is on the warpath, a quick thinking servant runs to tell Nabal's wife Abigail what has happened.

David sent messengers from the wilderness to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. 15 Yet these men were very good to us. ... 17 Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him.'

Abigail acts quickly. She pulls together enough food and wine for David's 600 men, no doubt dipping into the provisions for Nabal's feast, and she sets off to intercept David. We can feel the dramatic tension as she and David enter opposite ends of a ravine, hidden from each other. What will happen when they meet?

As soon as Abigail sees David she quickly gets off her donkey and bows to the ground. Her words to David are a mixture of wisdom, guile and prophecy. The goal is to turn David's wrath and stay his hand, and yet nowhere does she ask this directly. Her only requests are that David ignore Nabal and remember her. She begins by both dissociating herself from Nabal and at the same time taking responsibility for answering David's request for food.

Please pay no attention, my lord, to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name – his name means Fool, and folly goes with him. And as for me, your servant, I did not see the men my lord sent. **26** And now, my lord, as surely as the LORD your God lives and as you live, since the LORD has kept you from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, may your enemies and all who are intent on harming my lord be like Nabal. **27** And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my lord, be given to the men who follow you.

Abigail argues that God is at work to keep David from bloodshed and vengeance, even as she herself is the means of staying David's hand. Nabal's churlish character clearly extends to his marriage, as Abigail here basically wishes death upon him. In case David had any doubts Abigail was siding with him against her husband, she continues, verse 28,

28 'Please forgive your servant's presumption. The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the LORD's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live.

It's flattery, and an invitation for David to act as he should. But it is also prophetic. Just as the book opened with Hannah prophesying the kingship, so now another woman Abigail prophesies David will have a lasting dynasty or house. Yes Samuel anointed David as king, but Abigail is the first person to say that the LORD will give David a lasting house, something which God will promise David through the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7. This promise is one of the great touchstones of the whole of the Bible, that there will be an everlasting kingdom in David's line, a promise we see fulfilled in Jesus, great king David's greater son.

Abigail goes on to remind David of God's provision and protection, verse 29.

29 Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling.

The word translated bundle can mean stone or a pouch for stones that a shepherd would use to keep a tally of his sheep. The metaphor clearly refers to David's youth as a shepherd. Abigail then turns the

metaphor to recall David's defeat of Goliath with a stone from his sling. Her clever metaphor no doubt appealed to David's poetic imagination as Israel's greatest lyricist. In verse 30 Abigail finishes with a final plea both to David's self interest, but also to the path of wisdom and righteousness.

30 When the LORD has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him ruler over Israel, **31** my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the LORD your God has brought my lord success, remember your servant.'

Abigail intervenes with courage, decisiveness and wisdom, to save the lives of her people and to stay David's hand from taking revenge. As I read this passage, I can't help thinking that there are moments which we face when someone we know is on the brink of a dumb decision that will have devastating consequences for themselves and others. We recognise that people are responsible for their own lives. To speak up, to intervene, to warn, risks damaging the relationship. And yet a timely word can avert disaster and save a friend from heartache. I'm reminded of Proverbs 27.6:

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

I know there have been times where I have held back from warning, even wounding a friend, only to see them make even worse decisions. Yes, people may choose to ignore your advice, yes it takes courage and my goodness wisdom, but sometimes you may be just the person God in his providence uses to intervene in someone's life to keep them from sin and disaster, if only you would speak and act.

Overcoming Evil with Good (Providence, Trust and Ethics) 32-44

Abigail does intervene. Her brilliant speech stops David in his tracks.

32 David said to Abigail, 'Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. **33** May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. **34** Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak.'

There are two final scenes in the story. We return to Nabal's house where he's holding a banquet like a king. The text again delights in literary puns. Not only does Nabal mean "fool", but can also mean "wineskin". Further the root word can mean something dropped and it also sounds like the word for corpse. Abigail had said that God would hurl David's enemies away like a stone from a sling. Abigail waits till Nabal is nursing a hangover. We read in verse 37,

Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart failed him and he became like a stone. **38** About ten days later, the LORD struck Nabal and he died.

39 When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, ‘Praise be to the LORD, who has upheld my cause against Nabal for treating me with contempt. He has kept his servant from doing wrong and has brought Nabal’s wrongdoing down on his own head.’

The chapter ends with Abigail becoming David’s wife, and we discover David has also married another woman, Ahinoam of Jezreel, while his first wife, Saul’s daughter, Saul has taken and given to someone else. It’s a little window into the complexity of David’s family life. But that is a topic for another sermon!

Looking back over this chapter, David does not come off well. When insulted, he lashes out in anger and seeks revenge. It’s only Abigail’s wise and timely intervention that stays his hand. And yet, at the same time, both Abigail and David recognise that, in his providence, God has used her to keep him from bloodshed and from avenging himself. This is the way God providence is at work - through human agents, people like you and me. The question is will we act like Abigail when God prompts us? And will we listen like David when God confronts us?

This text also reminds me of St Paul’s words in Romans 12.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19** Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. ... **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

David says of Nabal, “He has paid me back evil for good.” But in his anger he was going to take revenge, and repay evil for evil. We’re so easily tempted to take justice into our own hands. Without the promise of the day of judgment, all we have is the justice we can wrest with our own hands. But we follow in the footsteps of the one who suffered the ultimate injustice, and yet did not seek revenge. “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”⁴ It’s in his strength, and secure in his love, that we can not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

⁴ 1 Peter 3.23