

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 18

WISDOM VS. FOOLISHNESS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

Chapter 25 of 1 Samuel is the story of Nabal and Abigail. They are the perfect contrast of wisdom and foolishness. Nabal almost gets his whole family killed, but Abigail saves the day.

Both character types seem to be complete packages.

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! Samuel, Week 18 — Wisdom vs. Foolishness

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1 1 Samuel 25:1–11

Then Samuel died; and the Israelites gathered together and lamented for him, and buried him at his home in Ramah. And David arose and went down to the Wilderness of Paran.

Now there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel, and the man was very rich. He had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. And he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. The name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. And she was a woman of good understanding and beautiful appearance; but the man was harsh and evil in his doings. He was of the house of Caleb.

When David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep, David sent ten young men; and David said to the young men, “Go up to Carmel, go to Nabal, and greet him in my name. And thus you shall say to him who lives in prosperity: ‘Peace be to you, peace to your house, and peace to all that you have! Now I have heard that you have shearers. Your shepherds were with us, and we did not hurt them, nor was there anything missing from them all the while 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 come on a feast day. Please give whatever comes to your hand to your servants and to your son David.’ ”

So when David’s young men came, they spoke to Nabal according to all these words in the name of David, and waited.

Then Nabal answered David’s servants, and said, “Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who break away each one from his master. Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give it to men when I do not know where they are from?”

Nabal’s rejection of David’s request is intentionally sharp and offensive. The phrase, “son of Jesse,” is meant to imply that David is a nobody because he’s from a nobody family. That’s nuts.

Nabal is introduced to us as *harsh and evil in his doings*, but it’s even worse than that. Nabal is the Hebrew word for fool. How he ended up with that name is a mystery, but it seems unlikely that his parents gave it to him at birth. Given his wealth, it could be a name people only used behind his back.

In any case, his actions here are true to his name. David’s men present their request humbly and make the point that Nabal’s shepherds have done quite well while they were near David’s men. The implication is that the zero “loss rate” for the sheep isn’t just okay; it’s extraordinary.

David’s men have been chasing off any predators.

Nabal’s foolishness is much more than just being *harsh and evil in his doings*. He lacks thankfulness. He shows this by not caring about the favors David’s men have done for his shepherds. But if he doesn’t appreciate favors from David’s men, then he doesn’t appreciate God’s blessings either.

That’s the essence of a fool.

2 1 Samuel 25:12–17 (ESV)

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. 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."

Nabal's words were designed to offend. This is confirmed by the Hebrew word translated as "railed" (נָעַח, ya-aht). It literally means scream or shriek. His response to David's reasonable request wasn't just a blunt "no", but a tantrum. So David is offended and makes ready to give Nabal an attitude adjustment.

We also get confirmation here that David's men were a big help to Nabal's shepherds. One of the shepherds even says, "*They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep.*" For a shepherd, that's a dream come true.

But what this guy says next is telling. "*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.*" This is a dire warning.

The Hebrew words translated as "worthless" (בֶּן-בְּלֵי-יָאֵל, ben b-lee-ya-al) literally mean son of worthlessness. Imagine a servant saying that about his master. He's clearly under a lot of stress.

Then the servant adds an even harsher conclusion—"one cannot speak to him."

Nabal has another hallmark of a fool—he won't listen.

Classes in communication used to teach students to say, "So, what I hear you saying is," and then repeat back what the other person said. This fell out of favor because once everyone was familiar with the phrase, actually using it made you sound like a robot.

But it was a useful lesson because it forced the student to listen well enough that they could at least repeat back what the other person had said. It's striking how many people don't even listen that well.

Of course, few people are as foolish as Nabal—who won't even listen to a warning. But we all tend to be set in our ways. It takes discipline to hear out things we don't want to hear.

But the things we don't already know are the things with the most learning potential.

3 1 Samuel 25:18–22

Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep already dressed, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded them on donkeys. And she said to her servants, “Go on before me; see, I am coming after you.” But she did not tell her husband Nabal.

So it was, as she rode on the donkey, that she went down under cover of the hill; and there were David and his men, coming down toward her, and she met them. Now David had said, “Surely in vain I have protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belongs to him. And he has repaid me evil for good. May God do so, and more also, to the enemies of David, if I leave one male of all who belong to him by morning light.”

Now when Abigail saw David, she dismounted quickly from the donkey, fell on her face before David, and bowed down to the ground. So she fell at his feet and said: “On me, my lord, on me let this iniquity be! And please let your maidservant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your maidservant. Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel 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.”

Not surprisingly, Abigail’s actions here are both wise and clever. Back in verse three, we learned that *she was a woman of good understanding*. So, unlike Nabal, she listened and understood the danger.

But there’s another quality displayed here that just leaps off the page—courage. Abigail walks right into the lion’s den and talks to the lion.

Her opening line is amazing. “*On me, my lord, on me let this iniquity be!*” It sounds like she’s taking the blame for everything.

In a way, she is. She’s acting as an ambassador for the family. She doesn’t plead for her own deliverance, but for the whole household’s.

She made the snap decision to put the whole thing on her shoulders.

The Old Testament often shows how the various aspects of character are correlated. This is especially true of bad character. The NIV’s footnote for Proverbs 1:7 makes this point, “*The Hebrew words rendered fool in Proverbs, and elsewhere in the Old Testament, denote one who is morally deficient.*”

Nabal and Abigail display this stark contrast beautifully. Nabal is both stupid and immoral, while Abigail is both wise and just.

Her courage takes this up another notch. That isn’t implied in the Hebrew grammar. Courage is a great addition to wisdom and justice, but is it expected? Similarly, are fools typically cowards?

I’ll leave these as open questions for now. Many examples, in Scripture and history, say yes.

4 1 Samuel 25:26–35

This is a love story. David and Abigail will get married before this chapter is out. Read this passage from that point of view. Try to see the love blossoming here.

“Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, since the LORD has held you back from coming to bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hand, now then, let your enemies and those who seek harm for my lord be as Nabal. And now this present which your maidservant has brought to my lord, let it be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant. For the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord fights the battles of the LORD, and evil is not found in you throughout your days. Yet a man has risen to pursue you and seek your life, but the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; and the lives of your enemies He shall sling out, as from the pocket of a sling. And it shall come to pass, when the LORD has done for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you ruler over Israel, that this will be no grief to you, nor offense of heart to my lord, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself. But when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your maidservant.”

Then David said to Abigail: “Blessed is the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! And blessed is your advice and blessed are you, because you have kept me this day from coming to bloodshed and from avenging myself with my own hand. For indeed, as the LORD God of Israel lives, who has kept me back from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, surely by morning light no males would have been left to Nabal!” So David received from her hand what she had brought him, and said to her, “Go up in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and respected your person.”

Okay, there’s no syrupy swooning over how cute Abigail is, or over David’s might as a warrior. Both of them simply display level-headedness and say all the right things. The right things include mutual respect, giving credit to God, and making a commitment to peace. How is that a love story?

These two would make a great team.

Hollywood has ruined love. In the movies, love is all about physical attraction. As a result, Americans typically see love as a uniquely delirious emotional state—sort of like a permanent crush. That’s silly. George Bernard Shaw saw through this nonsense in his 1908 play *“Getting Married.”*

“When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.”

The love stories in the Bible are more serious. There’s plenty of emotional content, but that’s not the whole story. As in today’s case, Biblical romances often involve people showing that they’re grownups.

Character matters.

5 1 Samuel 25:36–44

Now Abigail went to Nabal, and there 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; therefore she told him nothing, little or much, until morning light. So it was, in the morning, when the wine had gone from Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became like a stone. Then it happened, after about ten days, that the LORD struck Nabal, and he died.

So when David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Blessed be the Lord, who has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Nabal, and has kept His servant from evil! For the Lord has returned the wickedness of Nabal on his own head."

And David sent and proposed to Abigail, to take her as his wife. When the servants of David had come to Abigail at Carmel, they spoke to her saying, "David sent us to you, to ask you to become his wife."

Then she arose, bowed her face to the earth, and said, "Here is your maidservant, a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord." So Abigail rose in haste and rode on a donkey, attended by five of her maidens; and she followed the messengers of David, and became his wife. David also took Ahinoam of Jezreel, and so both of them were his wives.

But Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Palti the son of Laish, who was from Gallim.

Abigail returns home from her fateful encounter with David to find her husband oblivious to the danger she just delivered him from. In fact, he's drunkenly oblivious to everything. So Abigail holds her tongue.

But when Nabal sobers up in the morning, she drops the whole update on him. This turns out to be more than he can handle, and he goes catatonic.

Just as we saw that Abigail's character included courage, now we see that Nabal's lack thereof leads to complete collapse under stress.

It's curious how emotional things are described in terms of the heart: "hardhearted," "fainthearted," "braveheart," "lionheart," etc. But the heart's just an organ that pumps blood, right?

Obviously not. Yes, it's a euphemism, but there's something to it, and that something is correlated with other aspects of character. Fools don't appreciate blessings, they don't listen, they're morally deficient, and they're cowards. Conversely, wisdom is typically packaged with the opposites. This isn't my field, so I'll let C.S. Lewis have the last word. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis describes "men without chests."

They are not distinguished from other men by any unusual skill in finding truth nor any virginal ardour to pursue her. Indeed it would be strange if they were: a persevering devotion to truth, a nice sense of intellectual honor, cannot be long maintained without the aid of a sentiment [they] would debunk just as easily as any other. It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are no bigger than ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When have you seen striking thanklessness?
2. When has hearing something you didn't want to hear proved precious?
3. What kind of people are brave? What kind aren't?
4. What's the key to a good marriage?
5. Is our society's moral slide a heart problem?

Items for prayer: