



Married to Nabal

This past Sunday night we had a bird's eye view of 1 Samuel 25 and the story of foolish Nabal and his wise wife, Abigail. He was not much of a man but she was an incredible woman. How this marriage ever came about is anyone's guess. But I have a few ideas.

It is quite possible that when Abigail married him that she did not know that he was such a mess. This man was an Israelite (of the line of Caleb, Joshua's old sidekick) yet he is called 'Nabal', meaning 'scoundrel'. The Hebrew word connotes one who lives wickedly; one who lives like a fool, like those who say '*No God for me*' (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). When he was born did his father hold him in his arms and with great pride call him 'failure'? I hope not. Perhaps rather he 'earned' this as a nickname due to his foolish, godless behaviour. And perhaps this happened sometime *after* Abigail married him. One feels for a woman who thinks she is marrying a Christian only to one day discover that she is yoked to a '*no God for me*' scoundrel. But again, how did this awful 'mismatch' come about? Consider some possibilities.

Perhaps Abigail was at one time also a 'scoundrel', but by God's grace she became a worshipper of Yahweh *after* her marriage. If so then this would explain her attitude towards David and her honesty about her husband.

But perhaps Abigail was always a woman of godly wisdom but that she suffered from 'Abdicating Dad Disorder.' Dad failed to fulfil his God-given responsibility and by godless compromise he arranged this unequally yoked marriage for his daughter. His daughter was now matrimonially joined to a fool with the likelihood of little 'nabals' entering the world and causing havoc and heartache. After all, the apples usually don't fall far from the tree.

But let's consider another possibility. Maybe she walked the unwise path like so many Christians in our day. Perhaps she pleaded with her father to let her marry Nabal for after all 'he has so much potential. I am sure that once he settles down he will, well, settle down and change.' Thus perhaps the inception of that cursed and disastrous practice of 'evangelistic dating' and 'missionary marriage.' And by the way, apart from a *few* happy endings most of these compromised nuptials end up in the misery of a spiritually split home or the wife eventually becoming like her apostate husband.

Whatever the reason, Abigail finds herself married to a fool and because of his godless behaviour she is about to lose everything, including her life. What to do? Acknowledge that her husband is living disgracefully and then do what she can to deliver her household from the potential destruction resulting from her husband's sinful behaviour. Which is precisely what she does.

As she comes to David she confesses that she knows that her husband is wicked. She calls him a 'scoundrel' (vv. 14-25). Now some might take issue with this comment and be prone to criticise Abigail for defaming her husband. But they would be wrong. You see, he *was* a fool and Abigail was honest enough to confess this. She realized that her husband's actions put their entire household in jeopardy. So Abigail wisely intervened. And her household was spared the sword (vv. 26ff). I am impressed with Abigail. We all should be.

But not only should we be impressed with her we should also be very sensitive to the reality that there are many Abigail-Nabal marriages in the Church at large. And if we know an Abigail in such a marriage then we need to wisely counsel her. What does this look like? (An important caveat: This article is not exhaustively addressing the issue of a Christian woman who is married to an unbelieving man. Rather it is focused on an 'Abigail-Nabal' situation. Be discerning as you read and as you apply.)

To begin, Abigail must be prepared for a lot of conflict. And where there is conflict there is usually a whole lot of counsel. Abigail needs to be careful to *whom* and to *what* she listens.

For instance, many well-meaning people, including Christians, will counsel Abigail to leave the marriage. They will say things such as 'God wants you to be happy and so surely you should divorce Nabal.' Rather, when counselling Abigail help her to see that even though her life will be difficult nevertheless his 'acting the fool' is *not* grounds for automatic divorce. On the other hand, if Nabal wants to leave, then Paul instructs Abigail, '*let him depart*' (1 Cor 7:15).

There is another extreme that Abigail must also avoid, and Christians must help her to avoid it. I am speaking of the well-meaning yet misguided advice that she is to submit to Nabal completely, in *every* way. No, she does not. The command of Ephesians 5:22, '*wives submit yourself to your own husband in the Lord*' contains a qualifying caveat, '*in the Lord*.' All too often 'Job's counselors' come along quoting and (mis)applying this verse and the result is further crushing and confusion for Abigail. Let me explain with an example.

When Nabal abdicates his responsibility to spiritually shepherd the home then Abigail is well within her biblical rights to do what she must. Sometimes an Abigail finds herself in the unenviable position of needing to override Nabal's godless counsel in order to give godly direction to the children. But she must do this out of her higher allegiance to the 'Greater David', the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Paul means by, '*in the Lord*.' And in her obeying this stipulation it is quite possible that Nabal will be revealed before the family for the 'nabal' that he *is*; and he has no one to blame but himself.

Another example. What does Abigail do when Nabal abdicates his spiritual responsibility to lead Abigail in the worship of God? What should Abigail do when Nabal seeks to tear her away from biblical worship? What if he seeks to bar her from continuing in communion with her spiritual home, her local church? Abigail should ignore his commands. If Nabal chooses to turn away from the Lord and from God's ordained spiritual accountability structures then he will face Holy God on that score. But he has no right to demand that Abigail follow him down that path of destruction. With meekness she, like the apostles, must respond, 'I *must obey God rather than men*' (in this case, a man, Acts 5:29). As someone once said to me, '*Where God has spoken, no one else has the right to speak.*'

Finally, when it comes to the marriage bed, Nabal can be *very* selfish. Selfishness is at the heart of Nabal. '*No God for me*' is his motto because '*I am god*' is his motive. And this often manifests itself sexually. Nabal knows *what* he wants and *when* he wants it and *how* he wants it. And Nabal has the perverse idea that Abigail is biblically bound to comply. Not so.

Paul makes it clear that both the husband and wife are to give their bodies in the physically intimate act of marriage (1 Cor 7:1-5). The text is very clear. Yet Nabal will often (mis)use this principle as a club to manipulate Abigail to give in to his selfish demands. When at times Abigail says 'Not tonight' then she is not necessarily withholding herself. There is a big difference between 'not now' and 'not ever.' Well-meaning Christians often get this wrong and their counsel is not helpful. When Nabal is drunk or when Nabal is behaving cruelly then Abigail is not being rebellious because she refuses to be treated as a prostitute. In other words, Abigail is being biblically wise by not entertaining every fancy of her husband when he is behaving like a fool. And we should tell her so.

Of course these issues that I have touched upon could be expanded by someone more capable into a full length book, yet these issues demand our attention. The Church at large is often confronted with such marriages and we need to apply biblical wisdom to help the Abigail in our life. But since prevention is better than cure let me once again exhort fathers to be careful to fulfil their God-given responsibility. Guard your daughters. Abigail deserves a Knight, not a Nabal.

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