

Leaving Revenge to God: A Story of a Fool, a Hothead, and a Godly Woman

1 Samuel 25

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God...”

Introduction: Stories of revenge are always relatable because they speak to our human condition that recognizes *injustice* and that longs for resolution. In literature, revenge stories are a visceral and cathartic response to injustice and something that easily elicits emotion. If bitterness is the root, revenge is the action step. The desire to take revenge is common to all people, and is tied to *anger, frustration, wrath, and retribution, all stemming from a lack of forgiveness and desiring a pound of flesh*. In the Bible, you do not have to read very far to find the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, where Cain was **angry** at his brother, not for justified reasons but because of his own pride, so he killed him (James 4:1-2). But God stepped in and poured out righteous judgement, *cursing Cain and forcing him to wander and live as a fugitive* (Gen. 4: 12), to which Cain rebuffed as too harsh! Yet our hearts say, “YES, Cain got what he deserved.” Think of how revenge stories work in our world today:

- **William Shakespeare** understood this human condition in writing plays like *Hamlet*, and said, “If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? If you wrong us shall we not **revenge**?”
- **Herman Melville** in his classic story *Moby Dick* quotes Captain Ahab, “Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.”
- **Alexander Dumas** in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, where Edmund Dantes says “Death is too good for them. They must suffer as I have suffered.”
- **Charles Dickens** in *Tale of Two Cities* – “Vengeance and retribution require a long time...it is the rule.”

Classics like *Gladiator*, *Braveheart*, and the recent *John Wick* and *Dune* appeal to our desire for vengeance on evil or personal hurt. Even *The Princess Bride* speaks to the desire and execution of revenge. When Jesus quoted the OT Law (Exodus 21:24) about an *eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth* (Matt. 5:38), He not only talked about the reality of retribution, but presented a new ethic of NOT taking that vengeance in one's own hand (“if someone slaps you on the cheek, turn to him the other also”), and followed that with a treatise on loving our enemies and praying for those that persecute us (Matt. 5:44).

The problem we face is NOT the fact that there is true injustice in the world that needs to be dealt with, but the reality of **who** gets to mete out that justice. We often see injustice OUTSIDE of us, and our heart longs for things to be made right. When there is injustice, injury, or pain done to US, or our family, this elicits a response for vengeance that WE get to decide. What we will see is this: not only do we have to trust in the **sovereign** and **just** hand of God when we are wronged, but we must see that WE ourselves are deserving of justice and wrath, which cries out for a King who made propitiation on our behalf, so that we can have life but also respond with mercy, grace, and forgiveness to others.

The Setting and Story

We left David a couple of weeks ago leaving a cave where all the pointers looked like God was giving King Saul into his hand. Saul was caught unaware in a cave where David was hiding with his men, a group that had been on the run for their lives for months, existing in fear and anxiety, living as the hunted, knowing that at any moment Saul could catch them and would kill them. All David had to do was sneak up behind the king and with a quick stroke of his sword, end the war. But David was NOT willing to take matters into his own hand, and instead trusted the fact that since **God had anointed Saul AND David**, he would not lay a finger on God's anointed but **WAIT** on God's perfect timing, saying *"may the LORD avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you."* (1 Sam. 24:12). In this, David was right and just. But a key in our life in Christ is not only to be righteous and obedient in the BIG, but in the SMALL, not only in the seemingly important but also the common. These two chapters (24 and 25) are put next to each other purposefully, as David passed one test but was ready to fail the next, even though the second seemed more justified than the first.

The chapter starts with the **death of Samuel** in a most unceremonious way, which is how the Bible often does it. Every leader longs for a legacy, but we actually embrace the quote from Nikolaus Zindendorf, who said *"Preach the gospel, die and be forgotten"*. The death of Samuel not only marked a new era in leadership in Israel, but symbolically left David without yet another supporter. Day by day, David was more and more alone from a leadership perspective, even as he continued to add more men.

To understand the confrontation of this chapter we have to remember how David had to function. He had at least **600 men** as well as wives and children to feed and keep safe. The Wilderness of Paran provided ample places to evade and hide, but did not have many Costco's or In-n-Out trucks. He would be dependent on the goodwill of the people of Israel and the Middle Eastern custom of helping neighbors to keep this massive group healthy. Those that owned livestock like sheep and goats would send their flocks to feed and drink in the wilderness, and skilled shepherds would know where springs were located, providing life giving water and grass. It is clear that in their time of hiding David and his men came into contact with the sizable flock belonging to **Nabal**, and the well disciplined group did not kill any sheep for themselves, and instead, kept them safe. In light of this goodwill gesture, David rightfully expected that provision would be provided – like being invited over for dinner after watching someone's kids or house for an extended period of time.

Nabal: The Portrait of a Fool

We are introduced to a key player in the story by the name of **Nabal**, a name that literally means *"fool or foolish"* (love to have a conversation with his parents for this choice). Nabal lived up to (or down to) his name! He was described as a man who was **"very rich"**, possessing 3000 sheep and 1000 goats, which in that day was an immense amount. But what he had in riches and a good family (he was from a Calebite family), he lacked in character. He was described as a man who was **"harsh and badly behaved"** (25:3). He believed his wealth made him something and acted like a sovereign king and god over his seemingly significant kingdom. He exemplified **Proverbs 11:28**, *"Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf."* **Psalms 52:7**, *"See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction."*

But what Nabal really exemplified is **Psalms 14:1**, which says *"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good."* Because he believed HE WAS GOD, he was vicious, materialistic, and atheistic. He believed somehow he was the one who

created his riches (even if he may have inherited it or not) and his life was about keeping them, hoarding them, and enjoying them instead of being known as generous and kind. True foolishness comes whenever we somehow think that we have some say in areas of life that only God has sovereign care over, from life, possessions, safety, etc. Most people will not claim to be atheists, but simply live like practical ones. They LIVE like there is no god, or worse that they themselves is He.

Not only was his character toward riches corrupts, his lack of character was known by all who spent time with him: one of the young men who served him called him a **“worthless man”**; His wife Abigail called him a **“worthless fellow, for his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name and folly is with him”** (She should have said, ‘Nabal is his name, folly is his game...but we digress). When David sent his young men to inquire of Nabal for neighborly consideration, Nabal responded consistent with his character. He not only said **“NO”** to David, but he had to add disrespect on top of it. Look at his response in vv. 10-11:

*“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. 11 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?”*

Notice the sheer pride and condescension. He obviously knew who David was, but he downplayed him as a nobody who simply was rebellious. In other words, he denounced David as a scoundrel and character assassinated him. Then notice how many times he referenced himself and the audacity anyone had to ask for HIS POSSESSIONS. Refusing to take into account David’s integrity in guarding Nabal’s flock, Nabal showed his continual colors of a man thinking his wealth and status made him untouchable, able to make up his own rules, and not fearing the LORD.

What are WE to learn from Nabal? 1) Don’t name your kid after him. 2) Contentment is a desired quality, and if we have food and clothing, its enough to be so (1 Tim. 6:8), knowing that those who **desire** to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful **desires** that plunge people into ruin and destruction, for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:9-10). 3) Nabal DESERVED revenge and wrath for his actions. A case could be made by David why he wouldn’t kill **Saul**, but the case was made in the text as to what Nabal deserved. This sets the stage for David’s response and Abigail’s intervention.

David: A Picture of a Hot-headed Moment

*So David’s young men turned away and came back and told him all this. 13 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.*

David’s response to the wrongful disrespect was swift and decisive: **Men, strap on your swords!** His intentions were to bring justice, to avenge the wrong, and by the next morning to have not one male left to Nabal (25:34). He would meet the most likely sizable number of servants and workers of Nabal with an overwhelming force, bringing justice by bloodletting, satisfying the wrong done by having even innocent Israelites pay for the sin of their master! David would be judge, jury and executioner and would

feel justified in this destructive action. He would in his own words “**work salvation with his own hand**” (25:33).

Here is the problem. Who does this kind of action sound like? NOT David up until this point, but it sounds much more like Saul than David. Saul, out of jealousy, fear, pride, and perceived disrespect was willing to kill Israelite priests and met David’s band with an overwhelming force (3000 men! – 24:2). Where David was willing to trust God’s justice and nature with Saul, he was MORE THAN WILLING to deal with this seemingly more insignificant man on his own. If God had not intervened providentially, David would have carried this scar with him his whole life and kingship, killing his own people for an insult of one wicked man. Whenever we take matters into our own hands we run the risk of creating life long consequences, doing damage that can be forgiven but that will invariably leave scars. This is why our **emotions** need to be governed by God’s Word and our reactions of personal affronts by a robust view of the sovereignty of God.

Abigail: The Portrayal of a Godly Woman

Today our enemy desires to blur the line of gender itself, creating confusion as to what a man and woman is, let alone what they should be. The goal of Satan himself from the beginning was to denigrate the trust of mankind in God’s Word, infusing phrases like “Did God really say?” As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, the God-given makeup and nature of men and women were hijacked, where men no longer desired to play their role as loving and serving leader, since it came with much pressure and responsibility, and in the absence of this leadership women are primed to take it and usurp the role for themselves. In our day, one will receive swift and negative responses if you dare say a wife should submit to a husband, NOT be a pastor, or glory in being a mom. But the push of feminism has not only led to confusion, it has led to sorrow, angst, disappointment, frustration, and blame. One of the ways we push into culture is with a **better message of a biblical model**. 1 Samuel 25 gives us a beautiful picture of a Godly woman, an illustration of true strength AND beauty, of a woman whose character was exemplary in the midst of a hard marriage and extreme circumstance. In an episode of a rich man and a future king, it was a godly woman who shone brightest.

Abigail is the type of woman we hope our daughters become and who our sons can marry. It is not told how she got into this marriage, but it is clear she was in a one sided marriage. While Abigail was saving his bacon in an appeal to David, he was partying like a king all night, most likely with people like him or whom were interested in his wealth rather than true friendship. Abigail was described as “**discerning and beautiful**” (v. 3), which had a range of meaning from *desirable, pleasant, kind, and morally good*. She was one who exercised discretion, wisdom, generosity, humility, servanthood, and devotion to biblical truth despite her hard circumstances. Though outwardly beautiful, it was mainly her beauty of holiness that shines forth. She exemplified **Proverbs 31:30** *Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised*”

Oh that the church would be filled with this kind of woman, who demonstrate fear and trust of the LORD even when the men in their lives fail to play their roles well. May the woman of Grace be known for their beauty and strength, but primarily for their fear of the LORD and holy obedience out of a trust in the work of Christ on their behalf.

As David began his approach to unleash vengeance, Abigail was informed by a young worker what had happened, and how Nabal had disrespected and insulted the future king. I think a case could be made that Abigail could have rid herself of a terrible marriage by simply letting things take its natural course, letting David deal with her husband and freeing her from the unhappiness she undoubtedly felt daily. Yet, instead of sitting idly by, she sprung into action as an **intercessor** on behalf of her husband and the family as a whole.

Without telling her husband, she sent a large amount of provisions to David and his oncoming band as a freewill offering. In her **humility**, she bowed her face to the ground as David came close, calling him to place the guilt on HER instead of her husband. She then showed her **discernment** by appealing to David to see the reality, that her husband WAS worthless (she spoke truthfully) but that David would incur guilt by killing him. She showed **Biblical insight and wisdom** by reminding him that the LORD would make his house sure and that God had been and would continue to fight them. She demonstrated **discretion** by calling David to consider his own conscience for shedding blood without cause (v. 31). This was noticed, understood, and admired by David himself.

In a consistent yet surprising conclusion, Nabal drank himself into a drunken slumber after his all nighter, and in the morning Abigail informed him of all that had been done and what could have been done (v. 37). At this, his heart died and he became like stone, dying 10 days later as the LORD struck him. In other words, **God avenged David and Abigail**, in His own timing and own way. ***“The LORD has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head”*** (v. 39). After this, David called after Abigail to be his wife, and she agreed and showed her own humility by willingly going with him and calling herself his handmaid who would wash the servants feet (v. 41; cf. 1 Timothy 5:9-10)

Now, what do we learn about **revenge and vengeance** from this? 1) **First**, we must first recognize that this desire resides in all of our hearts. This tag teams with *bitterness and lack of forgiveness*, and where we often think we cannot forgive UNTIL the person that hurts us gets their punishment, payment, or the *quid pro quo* response. This was the interaction I had with a friend from this church years back, who, after a three hour, behind closed doors meeting of agreeing to disagree, took it public to simply hurt me. When I finally asked why, he simply said, *“I disagreed with you and it hurt, so I did this back to you”*. He said this without remorse or regret, but simply stated it as a fact. This desire exists in each of our hearts.

2) **Second**, we must remember that WE are sinful (more than we’d ever like to admit), and WE deserve the **wrath of God**, which is His ultimate exercise of justice. We are experts at seeing injustice outside of ourselves but have a much harder time seeing it IN ourselves. We long for justice for others, but pine for grace for ourselves.

3) **Third**, we are called to leave vengeance and revenge to the LORD! *“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”* **(Romans 12:17-19)** This command corresponds with those to keep bitterness far from us and forgive as God in Christ forgave us.

4) **Fourth**, and most importantly, God has made a way for **HIS WRATH TO BE SATISFIED** – Our sin puts us under God’s wrath, and no one gets away with anything, and all must account for everything ever done that falls short of God’s glory. We must be saved from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9). The **ONLY** way that

can happen is if God's wrath is satisfied in another way. That happened when Jesus became an atoning sacrifice, a **propitiation** on our behalf, where God treated Him like He should have treated us, and poured out HIS WRATH ON JESUS, so that He could become our righteousness (see Romans 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 4:10). The reason I don't need to take vengeance on brother's or sister's sin is the fact that Jesus has already done it. And if its an unbeliever, they will face it one day, which is why we pray for them and share the gospel so they do not have to. We have an **advocate who is our propitiation in Jesus Christ** (1 John 2:1-2), who saves us from the vengeance of God.

Revenge is common, forgiveness is not. Vengeance is normal, but grace and mercy are not. True justice is rare but will ultimately be given one day. The desire for revenge keeps us from relationships, with our friends, spouse, and kids. When we understand that we no longer have to hold onto wrongs done to us because they can be punished at the cross, we can actually begin to walk in peace, love, and joy. God providentially kept David from huge consequences of sin through the intercession of Abigail, **but He has given us a much better and complete gift in Christ**. All sin will be accounted for, either in punishment eternally or at the cross. May we be people who delight in the propitiation of Jesus on our behalf, and fervently call others to do the same.