

## ABIGAIL: A WOMAN OF STRENGTH AND WISDOM

Little is known of the background of Abigail, wife of Nabal. What we can derive from her story however reveals a woman of strength, courage, intelligence, integrity and wisdom. Her story takes up few pages in the Bible, but what it reveals is a woman leader in a subordinate role; who understands her place, and acts with decisiveness and integrity. Though it may take a bit of “reading between the lines”, we can gain a great deal of insight and wisdom for women’s relationships with the men in their lives today.

Abigail’s story is found in 1 Samuel 25 and takes place during David’s “outlaw” years while he was running from the mad and murderous King Saul. The great prophet Samuel has just died and the country mourns the loss of such a great and influential leader. David and his band of six hundred men take refuge in the wilderness of Paran near Carmel. This is also the place where the wealthy man Nabal is pasturing his flocks of sheep and goats. Thanks to David and his men, Nabal’s flocks and herds were well protected from the bands of Ishmaelites who roamed the wilderness to steal and cause harm. David and his men were on the run, and in survival mode. They could have simply taken from the herds for their needs or demanded payment for their services. But under the leadership of David, they were valiant and noble in caring for and protecting whatever flocks and herds camped nearby. Nabal’s men later described that protection to Abigail as a “wall” around them.

It was shearing time in Carmel. David sent an entourage of ten men to request that he and his band of six hundred men be included in celebrating the prosperity that was due in large part

to the protection that David and his men had offered Nabal's men and possessions. This was not an unreasonable request and was even considered customary.

But Nabal was a man who lived up to his name—fool. He not only refused David's request, but he mocked, ridiculed and insulted David, questioning his character and anointing as future king.

In a fit of rage, David instructed his men to strap on their swords and they set out to teach Nabal a lesson. This is not one of David's finer leadership moments. He was angry and he let his bruised ego overcome his good judgment. David let the insult fester until he vowed to slaughter every male in Nabal's household by morning.

Meanwhile, one of Nabal's servants approached Abigail for help. And here we begin to see Abigail's strength and character shine through.

### **Lessons from Abigail**

One might wonder how someone so obviously beautiful and intelligent became the wife of such a mean, rude and arrogant man. 1 Samuel 25:2 gives us an indication; "A certain man in Maon, who had property there at Carmel, was very wealthy..."<sup>1</sup> Abigail was most likely married to Nabal because he could afford her. We know nothing of Abigail's family background except that her name means, "my father is joy".<sup>2</sup> We will never know whether Nabal paid a great price for her, or if he got a bargain. Either way, he got much more and much better than he deserved in Abigail.

The fact that the servants immediately ran to Abigail for help tells us much about her role in the family. Abigail had obviously become the source of wisdom and reason in the household.

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<sup>1</sup>All scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the New International Version.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.biblestudytools.com/Lexicons/Hebrew/hebrew.cgi?number=026&version=kjv>

It is possible that this wasn't the first time Abigail had gotten Nabal out of a self-imposed mess. The words that the servant used when reporting this incident to Abigail indicate that it was no secret that Nabal was a mean-spirited fool. Abigail understood her place as wife and mistress of the household to protect her husband and his property. Nabal was thoughtless, self-absorbed and arrogant. Abigail was reasonable, wise and prudent in both her words and actions.

Abigail didn't waste time fretting over what to do, or bad-mouthing her husband. She simply went to work to try to rectify the situation. This tells us several things about Abigail.

She was smart. She didn't have to mull over possible scenarios or options. She instantly understood the gravity of the situation and the cultural expectations and potential impact. Time was of the essence. She immediately went to work putting a plan into action to save her family. She knew it would do no good to go to Nabal and scold him for being such a fool. No, she understood that she must act decisively if there was any hope of saving her husband's life. The cliché, "It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission" comes to mind. The servant accurately reported that Nabal was "such a wicked man that no one can talk to him!" (1 Sam. 25:17).

Women today cannot afford to be ignorant of current events and the culture of their ministry setting. It is obvious that Abigail had her finger on the pulse of her home, her servants and the people who depended on her husband and home for their livelihood and well being. A woman in ministry must be aware of the situations and needs in her ministry setting. She should constantly learning and growing as a person and as a leader. When a desperate situation arises, she must be able to quickly size up the situation and present a plan of action. The pace of change is so rapid in our current culture that we cannot afford to be caught off guard. Abigail demonstrates a woman who is prepared to move into action when the need arises.

She was resourceful. Abigail set to work pulling together an impressive gift for David and his men. Because the celebration of sheep shearing was under way—one that was in proportion to a feast of kings, Abigail was able to pull together a great deal of food in a short amount of time without raising her husband’s ire or suspicion. She loaded donkeys with the best that her husband had to offer in hopes of pacifying David’s anger.

As mistress of the household, Abigail likely gave oversight to all the matters pertaining to the household. It appears that she was intimately involved the day to day operations of her servants. She knew exactly what was available to her and where to obtain it.

In today’s world, a woman has many resources available. Following Abigail’s example, a woman today—whether in the home or ministry setting should be aware of the resources at her disposal. When an emergency or need arises, she will be able to meet the needs present because she has the resources on hand in view.

She was trustworthy. Abigail lives up to the Proverbs 31 standard. “Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies. Her husband can trust her, and she will greatly enrich his life. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.” (Prov. 31:11-13 NLT) Abigail sought to bring good to a husband so foolish that he was bent on harming himself. In addition, the servants obviously trusted her to rectify a horrible situation. She also had a network of support in her home. She had clearly built a level of trust with the household servants. She gave the orders and they obeyed without hesitation. This speaks of Abigail’s proven character, sacrifice and faithfulness. Somehow Abigail was able to make the best of a bad situation for herself and for those under her authority.

Social networking is a huge phenomenon in today’s culture. But no matter how many “friends” a woman has on Facebook, she still must build personal relationships and have trusted

co-workers and friends. Trust in marriage and ministry is hard-earned and easily broken. Abigail demonstrates the power of trust in her relationships with the household servants and employees and even, though he may not have appreciated it, with Nabal.

She was courageous. She understood that her husband's life and the lives of every man in her household were at stake. It would have been easy and even natural for fear to overtake Abigail in this setting. She might have been tempted to pack up and run for the hills – and who would have blamed her? It would have provided an easy way out of a terrible marriage. But Abigail was no quitter—she faced the oncoming disaster decisively and without apparent fear.

It takes courage to face today's changing culture and the challenges those changes bring. Fear paralyzes. Courage moves forward. To see what needs to be done and to move ahead regardless of the cost or the consequences is a characteristic that is desperately needed in ministry today. The combination of courage and wisdom is a rare and valuable commodity.

She was wise. Abigail's wisdom shines through over and over again in this story. Her decision to wait for the right moment to inform Nabal of her actions demonstrates wisdom and great restraint. When Abigail comes home from this intense interaction with David, she finds her husband in full party mode and drunk. She very wisely chose to wait until he was sober to inform him of how close he came to death.

True wisdom is rare these days. The Apostle James defines wisdom this way,

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:13-18)

Abigail demonstrates this kind of wisdom with every word and action.

### **The “S” word**

She was submissive. When she approached David, she honored him. Pastor David Guzik calls this “sweetly speaking submission”.<sup>3</sup> The scripture says that she bowed down before him. She acknowledges David’s reputation as a great leader, a future king and one who honors God in everything he does. Her words are not flattery, but sincere praise for a man whose deeds are legendary throughout Israel. Through her words and actions, she reminds him of his position, his character and his obligation to lead with integrity. Her humility and courage calls David to a higher level of thinking and action—one more consistent with his own values.

Submission is possibly the most important take away from the story of Abigail. The concept of Biblical submission is one of the most misunderstood teachings of the church. Abigail demonstrates what true submission looks like and what it does not look like.

Some might challenge Abigail’s words and actions as being disrespectful to her husband. However, a close examination of this situation and the resulting actions speak otherwise. Abigail knew her husband was a fool. Her confession to David at the start of their interaction is not so much a statement of disrespect about Nabal as it is a statement of the facts as everyone knew them. Her words showed her submission to a higher authority—Gods. The declaration of Nabal’s obvious character flaw was not intended to disrespect her husband, but to bring David to his senses. Killing Nabal and all the men in the household would cause David to commit the sin of murder. The fact that her actions were intended to save the life of her husband demonstrate honor, not dishonor. Sometimes we must simply tell it like it is. This was Abigail’s intent.

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.blueletterbible.org/commentaries/comm\\_view.cfm?AuthorID=2&contentID=7578&commInfo=31&topic=1%20Samuel&ar=1Sa\\_25\\_1](http://www.blueletterbible.org/commentaries/comm_view.cfm?AuthorID=2&contentID=7578&commInfo=31&topic=1%20Samuel&ar=1Sa_25_1)

Submission is not passive. The doormat image of a submissive wife is not a Biblical one. Abigail demonstrates what a true “help-meet” looks like in this situation. Nabal and all the men of his household would have been dead without her help.

Biblical submission carries with it the intent of looking out for the best interests of others. Philippians 2 paints an accurate picture of submission. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others.” (Phil. 2:3-4)

The picture that comes to mind is of two people rowing a boat. If the stronger of the two always uses his or her full strength in rowing – the boat would go around in circles and neither would get to their destination. Submission is give and take; the weaker leans on the stronger, the stronger surrenders and adapts to the weaker. When one is tired, the other takes over for a while. True submission and unity are inseparable characteristics of a good marriage, a great ministry and a dynamic church.

Abigail did not react out of self-protection or self-promotion. She acted in the best interests of not only her husband, but of her entire household. Silence is not synonymous with submission. Amazingly, while technically she is in no way at fault, she takes the blame for this cultural faux pas. “My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say. May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name is Fool, and folly goes with him. But as for me, your servant, I did not see the men my master sent.” (1 Sam. 25:24-25) Abigail’s soft words turn away David’s wrath. (Proverbs 15:1)

This is the most important lesson for women leaders to take from Abigail’s story. Most of us are not married to, nor do we work for fools the likes of Nabal. However, we can and do find

ourselves in situations where it would be easy to become critical and bitter and to think only of ourselves. We frequently have a choice to stir up trouble for ourselves and those around us or respond with word and actions which promote peace and reconciliation. Abigail uses her position as one of submission to her husband to save both her husband and her future king from destruction and future problems. Her calm insight promotes peace in David's heart and reminds him of the foolishness of forsaking his destiny over the insults of a fool. Her words remind David of who God says he is and his heart is turned to praise God because of her. She paves the way for God to deal with Nabal as He will. She had the power and position to protect her husband and her household from David. She left Nabal's future and judgment to God and encouraged others to do the same.

And God does deal with Nabal. Abigail wisely chooses the right moment to inform Nabal of his near death experience. When he has sobered up from his celebrating, she tells him the story of her encounter with David and he suffers a heart attack right on the spot. Whether it is prompted by fear or anger, we'll never know. The Bible says his heart failed him and became like a stone. He lingered for ten days and then the Lord struck him and he died. This is a vivid reminder that God is a righteous judge. He will not tolerate arrogance. Those men and women who do not possess a healthy fear of God will ultimately be punished.

Abigail demonstrates an amazing combination of confidence and humility that is much needed in women leaders today. She was calm and purposeful in every decision – never rash or combative. She maintained dignity, compassion, humility, strength, wisdom and grace in the middle of an oppressive and volatile situation.

Stepping out with confidence and bowing low in humility—an invaluable combination of strengths. This combination can only be learned in the crucible of necessity. From what we can

determine from this portion of scripture, Abigail has learned this lesson well from her years of living with this foolish dog of a man Nabal. Abigail demonstrates this practiced skill in her approach to David. She boldly approaches him—knowing full well that he has murder in his heart. Her confidence disarms him, and her humility quenches the fire of his anger in a moment.

### **A final word**

One additional attribute that Abigail possesses is her beauty. "...his wife's name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman..." (1 Sam. 25:3) It is interesting to note that very few women in the Bible are specifically described as beautiful; Proverbs 31 reveals the source of Abigail's true beauty, "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." (Proverbs 31:30)

Abigail's story continues to teach and inspire women about true beauty, godliness, wisdom and intelligence. Abigail is rewarded for her character and integrity as David recognizes not only her beauty, but her ability to be a wise counselor and he takes her to be his wife. Even in this instance, Abigail maintains her character. "She bowed down with her face to the ground and said, "Here is your maidservant, ready to serve you and wash the feet of my master's servants." (1 Sam. 25:41) She does not allow this promotion to make her arrogant or bossy. She maintains her sweet submissive spirit.

A woman who fears the Lord and submits to his ways can be sure that God will exalt her in His way and in His time. We need not recoil from true submission. James says it best, "Humble yourselves [feeling very insignificant] in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you [He will lift you up and make your lives significant]." (James 4:10 AMP)

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