

Part 17
1 Samuel 25–26

A Wise Woman and a Foolish King

Personal relationships are a large part of our lives, the most important being our relationship to the Lord. If from childhood you and I had kept a list of all the significant people who came in and out of our lives, we'd be amazed at their number and the variety of roles they played. Leaving God out of the picture, the longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer said that other people were "the playwrights and stage managers of our lives: they cast us in a role and we play it whether we will or no." But you can't leave God out of the picture! After all, He's the one who writes the script for us, chooses the cast, and puts us into the scenes He's planned for us. If we follow His directions, life becomes the satisfying fulfillment of His will, but if we rebel, the plot turns into tragedy.

These two chapters record four events that reveal David's involvement with four different kinds of people.

1. David loses a friend. (1 Sam. 25:1)

The death of Samuel, Israel's prophet and judge is mentioned twice in the book (28:3). Both references state that all Israel mourned his death and gathered to bury him. Of course, not every Israelite attended the funeral service, but the leaders of the tribes were present to pay their last respects to a great man. It was Samuel's faith and courage that helped the nation transition from political disunity to a somewhat united monarchy. Since Saul and Samuel had been alienated for over seven years, it's not likely that the king attended the funeral, but he would call on Samuel for help even after the prophet was dead (chap. 28).

The people of Israel didn't always obey Samuel when he was alive, but they were careful to honor him when he died. Such is human nature (Matt. 23:29–31). However, Samuel didn't prepare an elaborate tomb for himself at some important public place, but instead asked to be buried at his own house in Ramah, probably in the garden or in a courtyard. In his pride, King Saul had prepared a public monument to himself at Carmel (1 Sam. 15:12), but Samuel, who truly deserved recognition, humbly asked to be laid to rest at his own home.

David knew it would be dangerous for him to attend the funeral at Ramah, for Saul would have his spies there, so he retreated to the wilderness. David had shown his love and respect for Samuel while the prophet was alive, so there was no need for him to make a public appearance. Samuel had anointed David king of Israel and had often protected David and given him counsel. How wonderful it is when the saints of the older generation spend time with the younger leaders and help to prepare them to serve the Lord and His people, and how encouraging it is when the younger leaders listen and learn.

Samuel was the kind of spiritual mentor and counselor that every leader needs, because he put the concerns of God ahead of the politics of the hour. To Samuel, pleasing the Lord was far more important than being popular with the people. It broke his heart when Israel asked for a king, but he obeyed the Lord's orders and anointed Saul. It wasn't long before he was disappointed in Saul, but then the Lord led him to anoint David. Samuel died knowing that the kingdom would be in good hands.

David was in Masada ("the stronghold") when Samuel died (24:22), and he and his men left there for the "wilderness of Paran," more than a hundred miles south of Masada. Perhaps David felt that the loss of Samuel's influence and prayers meant greater danger for him and therefore he needed more distance between himself and Saul. Instead of "Paran," some texts read "Maon," a place of refuge near the Dead Sea where David had been before (23:24). The events in the story of Nabal occur in Maon near Carmel (25:2), and this suggests that Maon may have been David's hiding place.

2. David discovers an enemy. (1 Sam. 25:2–13)

During David's previous stay in the wilderness of Maon (23:24ff), which is in the vicinity of Carmel, his men had been a wall of protection for Nabal's flocks and those caring for them. Nabal was a very wealthy man, but he was not a generous man. When David returned to Nabal's neighborhood, it was shearing time, a festive event (2 Sam. 13:23) that occurred each spring and early fall. David hoped that Nabal would reward him and his men for their service, for certainly they deserved something for protecting Nabal's sheep and goats from the thieves that usually showed up at shearing time.

David's expectation was logical. Any man with 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats could easily spare a few animals to feed 600 men who had risked their own lives to guard part of his wealth. Common courtesy would certainly dictate that Nabal invite David and his men to share his food at a festive season when hospitality was the order of the day. It wouldn't be easy to feed 600 men in the wilderness, so David sent ten of his young men to explain the situation and to ask to be invited to the feast. Nabal refused to listen.

The character of Nabal is described as "churlish and evil" (1 Sam. 25:3), which the NIV translates "surly and mean" and the NLT "mean and dishonest in all his dealings." (Did he become rich by being dishonest?) He was from the tribe of Judah and the family of Caleb, one of the two spies who urged Israel to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13–14; Josh. 14:6–7). But the name "Caleb" also means "a dog," so perhaps the writer was conveying this meaning as well. The man was like a stubborn vicious animal that nobody could safely approach (1 Sam. 25:17). One of his own servants *and his own wife* both called him "a son of Belial -- a worthless fellow" (vv. 17, 25). The Hebrew word *beliya'al* means "worthlessness" and in the Old Testament refers to evil people who deliberately broke the law and despised what was good. (See Deut. 13:13; Judg. 19:22; 20:13; 1 Sam. 2:12.) In the New Testament, the word refers also to Satan (2 Cor. 6:15).

When the young men graciously presented their case, Nabal "railed on them," which the NIV translates "hurled insults at them." The Hebrew word describes the shrieking of a bird of prey as it swoops down to tear its victim. It's used to describe Saul's hungry men as they fell on the plunder and butchered the animals (1 Sam. 14:32; 15:19). His words are found in 25:10–11 and certainly reveal the heart of a man who is selfish, arrogant, and rebellious. Abigail recognized David as king (vv. 28 and 30) and called David "my lord," but Nabal compared David to a rebellious servant who abandoned his master! (v. 10) It's obvious that Nabal's sympathies lay with Saul and not with David, another evidence that he had no heart for spiritual matters as his wife did. When you note all the personal pronouns in verse 11, you immediately recognize his pride and self-importance. He didn't even give God credit for making him wealthy! (Deut. 8:17–18; Luke 12:15–21)

The young men reported Nabal's reply to David who immediately became angry and swore revenge on him. David could forgive Saul, who wanted to kill him, but he couldn't forgive Nabal who only refused to feed him and his men. Nabal was ungrateful and selfish, but those are not capital crimes; Saul was envious and consumed with the desire to kill an innocent man. David's anger got the best of him; he didn't stop to consult the Lord, and he rushed out to satisfy his passion for revenge. Had David succeeded, he would have committed a terrible sin and done great damage to his character and his career, but the Lord mercifully stopped him.

God's servants need to be on guard at all times lest the enemy suddenly attack and conquer them. "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8, NKJV). David was a godly man and a gifted leader, but the best of men are but men at their best.

3. David takes a wife. (1 Sam. 25:14–44)

When the Lord isn't allowed to rule in our lives, then He steps in and overrules. He saw that David was about to act rashly and foolishly, so He arranged for a wise and courageous woman to stop him.

Abigail's wise plan (1 Sam. 25:14–19). When this anonymous young man reported his master's actions to Abigail, he was serving the Lord whether he knew it or not. He knew he couldn't talk to Nabal about anything (v. 17), so he immediately went to his mistress, a wise and prudent woman. In those days, the parents arranged marriages for their children, so we aren't surprised to see a wise woman married to a foolish man. (Alas, it often happens today without the help of parents!) No doubt Abigail's parents considered it fortunate that their daughter could marry such a wealthy man, and she obeyed their wishes, but her life with Nabal must have been tedious. All her husband was interested in was money, food and drink, and having his own way.

The servant reported how David and his men had protected the shepherds and their flocks, and how Nabal had refused to repay them. Did the young man know that David and his men were on their way to confront Nabal, or did he simply surmise it? Perhaps it was the Lord who gave him a special intuition that trouble was coming. Nabal and his servants were defenseless against David's 400 men. But if David had succeeded in this venture, it would have given Saul the evidence he needed that David was a dangerous renegade who had to be dealt with drastically.

Abigail put together enough food for David's men but said nothing to her husband. She was the mistress of the house and could dispose of the family provisions as she saw fit, even to the extent of sharing it with others. Nabal would have opposed her even though she was doing it for his own good. She wasn't stealing from her husband; she was paying a debt that he refused to pay. In order to save a little money, Nabal was foolishly jeopardizing the lives of everybody in his household, especially his own.

Abigail's humble apology (1 Sam. 25:20–35). Only a sovereign Lord could have arranged the timing of David's attack and Abigail's approach so that the two bands met. Abigail bowed before David and acknowledged him as her lord and king; in fact, she used the word "lord" fourteen times in her speech. Nabal would not have approved of her words or her actions because he was a follower of Saul and considered David a rebel (v. 10). Abigail was a woman of faith who believed that David was God's king, and she saw King Saul as only "a man" (v. 29). She quickly confessed that her husband was a "worthless fellow" (v. 25, see v. 17) who lived up to his name -- fool, and she explained that she had known nothing about David's request for food. She accepted the blame for "this iniquity" (vv. 24, 28). In the rest of her speech, Abigail focused on David and the Lord and not on David and Nabal, and her emphasis was on David's future. By now David was calming down and starting to realize that he was in the presence of a remarkable woman. She pointed out that the Lord had stopped David from avenging himself, and David admitted this was true (vv. 32–34). Abigail admitted that her husband deserved to be judged, but she wanted the Lord to do it, not the king. In fact, she promised that the Lord would judge *all* the enemies of the king.

Abigail reminded David that the Lord had given him "a sure house" ("lasting dynasty," NIV), so he didn't have to fear the future. David was safe, bound in "the bundle of life" by the Lord; but his enemies would be hurled out like the stone David used when he defeated Goliath (see Jer. 10:18). No matter what Saul planned to do to David, the Lord would keep His promises and make David ruler over Israel. Then David would be glad he hadn't shed blood in order to avenge himself or get to the throne. The Lord would treat David well and he had nothing to fear.

Abigail had only one request for herself: that David would remember her when he came into his kingdom (1 Sam. 25:31). Was this a veiled suggestion of marriage, should Nabal die? Or was Abigail merely looking ahead and seeing herself as a widow who could profit from friendship with the king? Perhaps she was cautioning David to remember her and her advice when he became king so he

wouldn't be tempted to take things into his own hands and forget the will of the Lord. As it turned out, David didn't wait too long after Nabal's decease but took her as his wife!

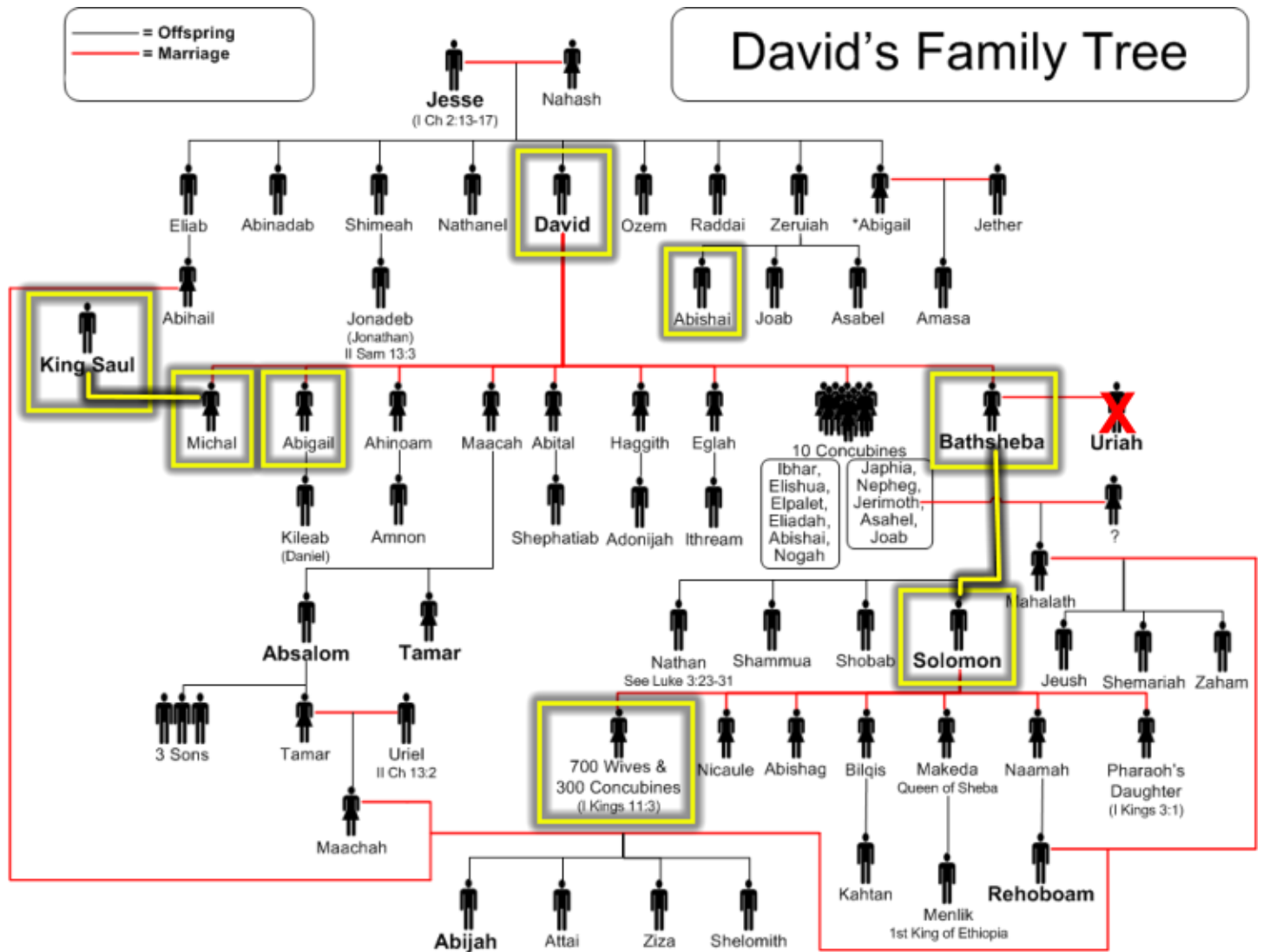
David blessed the Lord for providentially stopping him from killing innocent people, and he also blessed Abigail for her wise advice. David was a smart man to listen to reproof wisely given (Prov. 15:5, 10, 31–33); it's not likely that Saul would have listened to a woman's counsel. David wrote in Psalm 141:5, "Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness. And let him reprove me; it shall be as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it" (NKJV). How we receive reproof and counsel is a test of our relationship to the Lord and our willingness to live by His Word. David admitted that he was wrong, the Lord forgave him, and the Lord worked out the problem for him.

Abigail's unexpected marriage (1 Sam. 25:36–44). Nabal is feasting when judgment is just around the corner! He didn't stop to thank God for the blessings He had sent to him, or even to consider that these blessings came because of his wife's faith and in spite of his own meanness. Nabal's idea of happiness wasn't to praise God or feed the hungry, but to eat to the full and get drunk. Nabal made no profession of faith in the Lord but was like the people Paul described: "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame -- who set their mind on earthly things" (Phil. 3:19, NKJV).

Wisely, Abigail waited to tell her husband what she had done. The news so stunned Nabal that he experienced a stroke and lay helpless for ten days, and then the Lord took his life. What caused the stroke? Was it pride and anger on learning that his wife had dared to help David without his permission? Or was it shock in realizing the danger he had been in and how close he and his household had come to being slain? What if Saul heard that Abigail had befriended David? The king might consider Nabal an enemy and punish him accordingly. Whether one or all of these considerations caused Nabal's paralysis, it was the Lord who ultimately took his life. Sad to say, he died as he had lived -- a fool.

When David heard the news of Nabal's death, he praised the Lord for avenging him and preventing him from doing it himself. David's concern was the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom. Abigail certainly must have been pleased to be set free from the yoke of such a wicked man, a man she probably married against her will. David had been so impressed with her character and wisdom that he thought she would make a good queen, so he sent messengers to ask for her hand in marriage. It was an opportunity no woman would refuse, and she submitted to her king and even offered to wash his feet! In marrying Abigail, David not only acquired a good wife, but he also got possession of all of Nabal's wealth and property, which was situated near Hebron where David later established his royal residence (2 Sam. 2:1–4; 5:5). He had already taken Ahinoam as his wife, since she is always named before Abigail (27:3; 30:5; 2 Sam. 2:2). She was the mother of David's firstborn son, Amnon, and Abigail bore him Kileab, also named Daniel (1 Chron. 3:2).

But what about David's first wife, Michal, Saul's daughter, who had helped to save David's life? After David fled from home, Saul gave her to another man, probably using the alliance as a means to strengthen his own position and to break David's connection with the throne. There was no legal divorce, so Saul forced Michal into an adulterous relationship. When David was reigning over the tribe of Judah in Hebron, he demanded that Michal be returned to him (2 Sam. 3:13–16). However, Michal didn't remain a loving wife and probably resented David's taking her father's throne. She died childless (6:16–23).



David having many wives was not part of God's plan
Deuteronomy 17:17 (NCV)
 17 The king must not have many wives, or his heart will be led away from God. He must not have too much silver and gold.
Solomon was a greater offender than David

4. David spares the king. (1 Sam. 26:1–15)

Some students of the Old Testament have tried to prove that the account in this chapter is merely an adaptation of the one in chapter 24, but the evidence stands against this interpretation. There are differences in locations (a cave in En Gedi; Saul's camp near Hachilah), times (day; night), activities (Saul came to the cave; David went to the camp), David's responses (cutting off part of Saul's robe; taking Saul's spear and water jug), and David's words (spoke only to Saul; spoke to Abner and Saul). This second experience with Saul was certainly more daring on David's part since he was actually in Saul's camp. David's recent experience with Nabal and Abigail had reassured him of his future reign and had taught him a profitable lesson about revenge.

Treachery (1 Sam. 26:1–4). Like Nabal, the Ziphites were related to Caleb (1 Chron. 2:42), but being members of the tribe of Judah, they should have been loyal to David. Hoping to gain the king's approval, for a second time they betrayed David to Saul (1 Sam. 23:19ff; see Ps. 54). Saul had learned to appreciate David's skill as a tactician, so he took his 3,000 soldiers to search for David in the wilderness. But David was already far ahead of him, for his spies had located Saul's camp, and David was safe in the desert. The Lord kept David safe and delivered him whenever Saul was near. "He delivered me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me, for they were too strong for me" (Ps. 18:17, NKJV).

Audacity (1 Sam. 26:5–12). The Lord must have instructed David to go to Saul's camp that night, because He sent a deep sleep upon Saul and his men. Saul and Abner, who was Saul's captain (14:10) and cousin (v. 50), were sleeping at the heart of the camp, surrounded by the wagons and baggage ("the trench" KJV). Because of the supernatural sleep sent by the Lord, David and his nephew Abishai were able to penetrate to where Saul and Abner lay. This is the first mention of Abishai in Scripture. As usual, Saul's spear was at hand, the symbol of his office and his authority (26:7, 11; 22:6; 18:10; 19:9; 20:33).

Abishai was sure that it was God's will that he kill Saul and put an end to his selfish rule and his relentless persecution of Israel's true king, but David stopped him. David had settled this matter in the cave (24:1–6) and there was no need to consider it again. He had also seen what the Lord did to Nabal. David was sure that Saul's life would end at the right time and in the right way, either by natural death or by a judgment from God, and then the throne would be his. When Abishai looked at Saul, he saw an enemy, but David looked at him and saw "the Lord's anointed." Instead of taking Saul's life, David took his spear and water jug, just so he could prove to Saul a second time that he didn't have designs on the king's life. David didn't let Abishai take the spear lest he be tempted to use it.

It would have been easy to argue that David had been wrong in the cave and that God was giving him a second chance to kill Saul, but David's decision was based on principle and not circumstances. **David knew that it was wrong to lay hands on God's anointed, even though the king wasn't serving as God wanted him to serve. David might not have been able to respect the man, but he did respect the office and the God who gave that office to Saul.**

Mockery (1 Sam. 26:13–16). David and his nephew made their way to the hill opposite Saul's camp where they were safe and from which they could be heard, and David called back to the soldiers in the camp and especially to Abner, the king's bodyguard. He was careful not to humiliate Saul in the presence of his men, although Saul couldn't easily escape the embarrassment of the situation. David didn't identify himself to Abner but only referred to himself as "one of the people" (v. 15). The absence of the spear and water jug was evidence enough that someone indeed had been close to the king and could have killed him. Abner was guilty and could have been disciplined for not doing his duty.

Dishonesty (vv. 17–25). Saul recognized David's voice and responded by calling him "my son, David," but David didn't call him "my father" as he had before (24:11). His address was only "my lord, O king." Saul's daughter Michal was no longer David's wife (25:44), so David was no longer son-in-law to the king. Furthermore, Saul certainly hadn't treated David like a son.

Once again, David tried to reason with Saul and show him how wrong he was in his thinking and acting. David wanted to know what his crime was that Saul had to pursue him and seek to kill him. If David had broken one of God's laws, then he was willing to bring a sacrifice and have his sin forgiven by the Lord. But if Saul was treating David like a criminal because of the lies his officers had told him, then *they* were the offenders, not David, and they would pay for their sins. Saul and his officers had

driven David out of his own land, the very inheritance that the Lord had given his family, and if David moved to other lands, how could he worship Jehovah away from the priesthood and the sanctuary?

But if David wasn't guilty of any crime or sin, why should Saul invest so much time and energy in pursuing him? The king of Israel was chasing a partridge just for the privilege of shedding its blood! (Partridges don't like to fly. They run from one cover to another.)

Once again, Saul lapsed into one of his sentimental moods (see 24:17) and confessed that he was a fool and a sinner. He promised that he wouldn't harm David, but David didn't believe him. His only reply was, "Behold the king's spear! Let one of the young men come over and fetch it" (26:22). When David cut Saul's robe in the cave, he reminded him that his kingdom would be severed from him, but in taking the spear, he humiliated the king and robbed him of the symbol of his authority.

For the second time, David had spared Saul's life, and David knew that the Lord would reward him for what he had done (Ps. 7:8). But David didn't expect Saul to value his life as he had valued Saul's life, because he knew Saul couldn't be trusted. Rather, he asked that the Lord reward him with protection and safety just as he had protected the king. See Psalm 18:20–27.

The last recorded words of Saul to David are in 1 Samuel 26:25, a statement that affirms the greatness of David's deeds and the certainty of his kingship. The two men parted, Saul heading for ultimate disgrace and death, and David to ultimate glory and victory. However, David's unbelief would take him to the land of the Philistines and the city of Ziklag, where he would live for about a year and a half. Soon David's years of wandering and testing would end and he would be ready to sit on the throne of Israel and rule God's people. One day David would look back on those difficult years and see in his painful experiences only the goodness and mercy of the Lord (Ps. 23:6).