

Lesson Seven

1 SAMUEL 25

Abigail: Wisdom, Courage, and the Soft Answer

She is one of the most quietly remarkable women in the Old Testament, and we meet her at exactly the wrong moment in her life. Her husband, a wealthy sheep rancher named Nabal (which literally means "fool"), has just insulted the future king of Israel. David and four hundred armed men are now hours away from her house, and her husband does not know they are coming. By sundown, every male in her household will be dead. Unless someone intervenes.

Abigail intervenes. Without telling her husband, she rides out to meet David, bows in the road, and delivers one of the most rhetorically brilliant speeches in the entire Old Testament. She talks an angry future king out of becoming a murderer. She saves her household, her servants, and her marriage. And in a way none of them yet sees, she saves David from a sin that would have stained the rest of his reign.

Abigail's story is about wisdom under pressure. It is also about how a godly woman lives faithfully in a marriage that is anything but ideal. And it is about the kind of soft answer that, as Proverbs 15:1 says, turns away wrath. Read 1 Samuel 25 carefully this week, and pay attention to every word that comes out of Abigail's mouth.

First impressions

1 Samuel 25 is positioned with care. Chapter 24 records David sparing King Saul's life in the cave at En Gedi. Chapter 26 records David sparing Saul a second time, in the wilderness of Ziph. In between, chapter 25 tells a different restraint story: David almost takes a vengeance into his own hands, and a wise woman stops him just in time. The author of 1 Samuel is showing us that David's character is being formed in the wilderness, long before he sits on the throne, and that one of the chief human instruments God uses to form him is a woman named Abigail.

1. a. Read 1 Samuel 25 in one sitting. What is your impression of Abigail?

 b. Of Nabal? Of David?

A mismatched marriage (25:2–13)

Marriages in that culture were typically arranged by parents, with the dowry and the family's standing weighing heavily in the decision. Abigail's beauty and wisdom would have made her a prize. Nabal's

wealth would have made him an attractive match to her family. But money and land are not the same as character, and Abigail, even before chapter 25 begins, has clearly had to live with the gap between the two for a long time.

2. Read 25:3. How does the narrator describe Nabal and Abigail? Note the contrast.
3.
 - a. In 25:4 to 8, David sends ten young men to greet Nabal politely and ask for a small gift in return for the protection David's men have provided his flocks. What does Nabal do in 25:10 to 11?
 - b. What does his response reveal about him?

For Thought and Discussion: Many women, including women in our congregations, live with husbands who are difficult, foolish, harsh, or unbelieving. What does Scripture say to them? Compare 1 Peter 3:1 to 6; 1 Corinthians 7:12 to 16; Romans 12:18. What does it not say?

4.
 - a. Read 25:12 to 13. How does David react to Nabal's insult?
 - b. What does his immediate impulse tell us about David at this stage of his life?

Abigail's discernment and speed (25:14–22)

5.
 - a. In 25:14 to 17, one of Nabal's young men comes to Abigail. What does he say about David's men, about the danger, and about Nabal himself?
 - b. What does it say about Abigail that the servants brought the problem to her rather than to her husband?
6.
 - a. Read 25:18 to 19. How quickly does Abigail act? What does she load up?

- b. Notice the end of 25:19: "She did not tell her husband Nabal." Why do you think the narrator includes that detail?

For Further Study: Abigail's decision to act without consulting her husband has been much discussed. Compare it with the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1, Rahab in Joshua 2, and Esther in Esther 4. When does Scripture commend a wife or servant acting independently of an unjust authority? What limits does it place on that?

7. Verses 20 to 22 cut back to David, who is muttering to himself about all the ways he has been wronged. What does David vow to do? What does this scene tell you about how anger gathers steam when we rehearse our grievances?

Her appeal to David (25:23–35)

Abigail's speech in 25:24 to 31 is a masterclass in courageous persuasion. She does not flatter David, and she does not condemn him. She takes the blame on herself (25:24), names Nabal's foolishness (25:25), reminds David of God's promises (25:28 to 30), and warns him gently of the regret that vengeance would bring (25:31). She speaks to his future, not his anger. She speaks to who he is called to be, not who he is tempted to be in this moment.

Study Skill, Outlining a Speech or Argument: When the Bible records a long speech, it pays to outline what the speaker is doing. List each move in order, in your own words, and ask why the speaker made that move at that point. Try this on Abigail's speech in 25:24 to 31. (Most readers find five or six distinct moves.) Outlining also works on the sermons in Acts (2; 7; 13; 17), the speeches in Job, and the long arguments of Paul. Once you see the structure, the passage opens up.

8.
 - a. Trace the logic of Abigail's speech (25:24 to 31). Outline the moves she makes.
 - b. Where does she shift David's attention from Nabal's offense to David's own future?
 - c. What does she remind him that God has promised about him (25:28 to 30)?
 - d. What does she warn him would haunt him if he goes through with his plan (25:30 to 31)?

For Thought and Discussion: Where in your own relationships do you have an opportunity to speak to someone's better self, to remind them of who they are called to be in Christ, rather than reacting only to who they are being right now?

9. a. Read David's response in 25:32 to 35. What three things does he bless in 25:32 to 33?

b. Notice 25:33: "You have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from saving with my own hand." What was the deeper rescue?

God's verdict on Nabal (25:36–44)

10. a. Read 25:36 to 38. What does Abigail do when she gets home? What does she not do?

b. What does God do to Nabal, and how is it different from what David almost did?

Notice that David did not have to take vengeance into his own hands. The Lord took care of Nabal in His own time and in His own way. The principle is timeless. Paul will write it down for the church in Romans 12:17 to 21: "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." Vengeance is dangerous in human hands because we are not impartial, we are not all-knowing, and we are not God. Leaving it to Him does not mean doing nothing; it means doing the next right thing and trusting Him with the outcome.

11. When David hears that Nabal is dead, he sends for Abigail to become his wife (25:39 to 42). What does this tell us about how God had been at work even in Abigail's painful first marriage?

Abigail and the soft answer

Study Skill, Reading Wisdom Literature into Narrative: The book of Proverbs gives us short, pointed sayings about wisdom and folly. The narratives of Scripture give us long, fleshed-out stories of wisdom and folly in action. The two kinds of literature illuminate each other. When you read a narrative, ask which Proverbs are being lived out on the page. When you read a Proverb, look for a narrative that shows it in motion. 1 Samuel 25 reads like a working example of Proverbs 9:13 to 18 (the foolish woman) set next to Proverbs 31:10 to 31 (the wise woman), all woven into a single afternoon.

12. a. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Where do you see this principle at work in 1 Samuel 25?
- b. Where in your own life are you most tempted to give a harsh word? What would a soft answer look like?
13. a. Abigail also gives us a picture of what intercession looks like. She stands between an angry king and a doomed household. Whom does this remind you of?
- b. Compare Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Timothy 2:5. How is Jesus our one Mediator, the One who steps between us and the judgment we deserve?

Optional Application: Think of one relationship in your life that has been damaged by harsh words, yours or theirs. What would it look like, this week, to ride out into the road with a basket of bread and a soft answer? Be specific.

Your response

14. Abigail teaches us to act with wisdom and speed when it matters. Where in your life are you currently being slow when you ought to be quick, or quick when you ought to be slow?
15. Abigail also teaches us that godly women in difficult marriages are not powerless. They have a Father, a wisdom, and a voice. If this applies to you (or to someone you know), what does this story say to her?
16. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take from Abigail's story, and one concrete step you will take in light of it this week.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share about a time when a soft answer (her own or someone else's) made an outsized difference in a tense situation.

Discussion. 1 Samuel 25 is a long, intricately written chapter. Don't try to discuss every question. Pick four or five. Pay particular attention to questions 3 to 4 (the foolish husband and the angry king), 8 (Abigail's speech), 12 (the soft answer), and 13 (Abigail as a picture of intercession).

Wrap-up. Close by praying for the women in your group who are walking through hard marriages, hard friendships, or hard family situations, for wisdom, courage, and a soft, accurate tongue. Thank God for our great Mediator who has spoken on our behalf.