

THE LORD WILL REPAY

1 Samuel 25:32-44

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, March 14, 2010

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, “Blessed be the LORD who has avenged the insult I received at the hand of Nabal, and has kept back his servant from wrongdoing. The LORD has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head.” Then David sent and spoke to Abigail, to take her as his wife (1 Sam. 25:39).

Prominent among the Bible’s doctrines in dispute today is the idea of God’s retributive justice. This concept of divine judgment was summarized by the apostle Paul when he asserted, “‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19). A number of scholars today object to this doctrine, denying that God “gets even” with sinners through judicial retaliation. Stephen Travis, for instance, has written that “the judgment of God is to be seen not primarily in terms of retribution, whereby people are ‘paid back’ according to their deeds.”¹ He and other opponents of this doctrine object that divine retribution encourages violence among men.

Against this denial stands the witness of both testaments in the Bible, where God’s justice is clearly retributive. When Achan disobeyed God by stealing from the sack of Jericho, his punishment was to be stoned to death along with his family and possessions and their remains burned (Jos. 7:24-26). Why? Joshua explained in the clear language of retribution: “Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today” (Jos. 7:25). The same kind of judgment is observed in the New Testament. Consider the fate of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit about the money they gave to

¹ Stephen H. Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), Preface.

the church and were slain at the word of the apostle Peter (Acts 5:1-10). Moreover, the Bible's depiction of the final judgment is pure retribution for the wicked: "the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (Rev. 20:12).

Not only does the Bible prove God's unyielding punishment on all sin, but acceptance of this truth is essential to both biblical belief and biblical living. Few chapters of the Bible demonstrate this in such living color as 1 Samuel 25, where the events' conclusion rests upon the great truth that the Lord will always repay.

LEAVING VENGEANCE TO GOD

Despite claims that belief in divine retribution promotes violence in human society, the biblical record shows that the opposite is actually true. An example of this is seen when David advanced with bloody intent upon the home of Nabal, the rich fool who had denied him provisions and heaped abuse on his name. David was met by Nabal's beautiful and discerning wife, Abigail, who not only brought the supplies that David had asked for, but also brought words of warning regarding God's justice. She explained that she had come to restrain David "from bloodguilt," by taking vengeance "with your own hand" (1 Sam. 25:26). She further argued that in later times when God's promise to make David king had been fulfilled, he would be glad for not "having shed blood without cause or for my lord taking vengeance himself" (1 Sam. 25:31). In Abigail's biblical reasoning, David must refrain from taking vengeance precisely because God would not so refrain.

Abigail was repeating a principle that was clearly expressed in the Holy Scriptures. This principle is that when humans are sinned against, they are not to take vengeance into their own hands but to leave vengeance to the Lord. Abigail was possibly referring to Deuteronomy 32:35, where God declared: "Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly."

These words form a part of the Song of Moses, in which the great redeemer concluded his ministry with a song of praise for all that God had done in the exodus. In this song, Moses had condemned not only the opposition of pagan nations but also the hardened unbelief of

Israel. The latter had been Moses' greater problem, as Israel frequently rebelled against his authority and complained against the Lord. There was, for instance, the dreadful occasion recorded in Numbers 16, when Korah, Dathan, and Abiram led a rebellion against Moses in the wilderness. God answered by opening the ground to swallow up these rebels, along with their families (Num. 16:31-33). Afterward, the entire congregation of the Israelites rose against Moses and Aaron, advancing against the tent of meeting where God's servants dwelt. God responded by sending a plague among the Israelites that slew almost 15,000 people (Num. 16:41-50). It was in remembrance of these and similar events that Moses sang of God's vengeance: "For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants" (Deut. 32:36). God's vengeance on his enemies, Moses says, will show him to be the true God, even as he exposes the idols of those who rebel against his rule.

We sometimes will hear it stated as a rule that God's people must always do what God does, yet here is an example of exactly the opposite. God's people are *not* to take vengeance precisely because they know that God *will*. Moses did not pray to a God who was indifferent towards evil, but one whose wrath burned against sin and rebellion. Retribution belongs to the Lord, who is just and perfect in his judgment. Some men and women, serving in public office, have the duty of prayerfully distributing civil justice (Rom. 13:4). With that exception, we fallible men and women should leave vengeance to the God whose justice never fails and never errs.

David had therefore been on the brink of committing gross sins in his anger against Nabal. Just before the arrival of Nabal's wife, he had boasted to his men that by the morning he would not have left a single male alive in all of Nabal's house. Now remembering the Lord, David praised both God and Abigail for delivering him from his violent passion: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from avenging myself with my own hand!" (1 Sam. 25:32-33). How relieved David was to be turned from his sinful path: "For as surely as the LORD the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless

you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male” (1 Sam. 25:34).

Abigail’s embassy reminds us that the best counsel is that which reminds us of the Lord and declares his commands. Likewise, David’s response shows that the best decision is always the one that yields to Holy Scripture. People do not always take biblical reproof for the blessing that it is. “But David knew how much courage and discernment it took for Abigail to act as she did... She had both saved lives and kept him from a tragic sin, that of avenging himself with his own hand.”² David realized what John Murray would later summarize: “The essence of ungodliness is that we presume to take the place of God, to take everything into our own hands. It is faith to commit ourselves to God, to cast all our care on him and to vest all our interests in him.”³ David’s responsive heart to biblical correction was one of the chief factors that accounts for his greatness as a man of God, and such humility before God’s Word is a recurrent feature among the exemplary figures of the Bible.

David concluded his meeting by restoring his peaceful demeanor towards Nabal’s wife and thus toward Nabal himself. “Then David received from her hand what she had brought him. And he said to her, ‘Go up in peace to your house. See, I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition’” (1 Sam. 25:35). Had Nabal crossed his path, David’s biblical duty would have been to extend the same peace and blessing to him as to his wife. Paul explains how Christians, knowing that God will repay, should respond to those who have harmed us: “‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:20-21). According to the Bible, while only God is competent to extract vengeance, we are all empowered and authorized to extend mercy. According to Charles Hodge, “To heap coals of fire on anyone is a punishment which no one can bear; he must yield to it. Kindness is no less effectual; the most malignant

² Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 239.

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 141.

enemy cannot always withstand it. The true and Christian method, therefore, to subdue an enemy is to ‘overcome evil with good.’”⁴

WICKEDNESS REPAID WITH DISMAY AND DEATH

The best proof that David was right in leaving vengeance to God is what subsequently happened to foolish Nabal. When last we saw him, this miserly rich man was denying needed provision to David and his patriotic band. When it came to himself, however, Nabal had enough to spend lavishly. He was not only drunk with his greed but he was literally drunk in enjoying his riches: “Abigail came to Nabal, and behold, he was holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king” (1 Sam. 25:36). Not only did Nabal think of himself as a king, but he reminds us of a particular king: king Saul! The contrast with David is clear: At the very moment that David was blessing Abigail for helping him to remain in the right with God, Nabal was indulging himself in sinful pleasures in violation of God’s law.

Nabal reminds us of the rich man in Jesus’ parable, who “feasted sumptuously every day,” while he refused to provide even his table scrapings for poor Lazarus who begged at his gate (Lk. 16:19-21). Moreover, Nabal embodies the false security of sinners who plunge lustily into sin, having so far escaped divine judgment that they imagine themselves beyond God’s reach (see Eccl. 8:11). A. W. Pink writes, “The fool Nabal vividly portrays the case of multitudes all around us. The curse of God’s broken law hanging over them, yet ‘feasting’ as though all is well with their souls for eternity.”⁵

Nabal’s depravity is seen not only in his drunkenness and greed but also in his relationships. Earlier in the chapter we saw that his faithful servants considered him “such a worthless man that one cannot speak to him” (1 Sam. 25:17). In her embassy to David, his wife had been forced to call him “a worthless fellow” (1 Sam. 25:25); this cannot have been a pleasant admission for a woman of such virtue. Given that the occasion for this drunken bout was the shearing feast, Cyril Barber suggests that Nabal’s guests were “the

⁴ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 402.

⁵ A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:152.

migrant shearers... with whom he seems to have a great deal in common... If people are to be judged by the company they keep, it is significant that Nabal had established rapport with the least desirable members of Hebrew society.”⁶ For many sinners, the contempt of the discerning and the company of the depraved is a foretaste of the final judgment that awaits them in hell.

In the eyes of the world, a rich man like Nabal was in an enviable situation. But in the lens of Scripture we see him as ripe for God’s judgment. Abigail had assured David that “the lives of your enemies [God] shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling” (1 Sam. 25:29), and Nabal had placed himself in precisely such a vulnerable place for judgment. But before his punishment of death would come the dismay that confronts all who realize too late the error of their sinful ways. For Nabal, this dismay arose in the morning, when his wife could finally address him. “In the morning, when the wine had gone out of Nabal, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became as a stone” (1 Sam. 25:37). For all her discretion in speaking to David, we have no idea how mildly Abigail broke the news to her husband of his narrow escape from death by David’s sword. Perhaps, in her disgust, Abigail was not discrete at all. In any case, the shock of the news brought such dismay to Nabal that “his heart died within him,” which perhaps signifies a heart attack or stroke. Finally, “about ten days later the LORD struck Nabal, and he died” (1 Sam. 25:38). Many sinners today delude themselves with the idea that when the reality of judgment is brought to their minds, they then will have time and opportunity to repent and be saved. Nabal shows the folly of this thinking, for the dismay of judgment was itself a kind of death from which he could not recover.

Notice that Nabal did not simply die from “natural causes” as a result of his earlier convulsion. It was the Lord who struck Nabal. God had taken vengeance for Nabal’s sin against God’s anointed king, David, just as he is sure to do in the final judgment to all who despise Jesus Christ, of which David’s kingdom was a type. Nabal’s sin had been against God personally, and his judgment had not been administered personally by God against him. Nabal’s demise was not

⁶ Cyril J. Barber, *The Books of Samuel*, 2 vols. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1994), 1:269.

merely the natural outworking of impersonal rules of divine providence, but God himself had struck Nabal down as retribution for his sin. Nabal's wickedness had been repaid in God's timing, a timing that was and is far swifter than those like Nabal might foolishly hope.

Not only was Nabal's sin repaid, but his judgment was celebrated. Here is a man for whom no one seems to have mourned. But David, hearing the news, openly rejoiced: "he said, 'Blessed be the LORD who has avenged the insult I received at the hand of Nabal, and has kept back his servant from wrongdoing. The LORD has returned the evil of Nabal on his own head'" (1 Sam. 25:39).

There are several reasons why David might have rejoiced, none of which would have involved him in an unholy glee over the demise of his enemy. First, he surely rejoiced in the display of God's glory that the Lord's judgment always involves. In Psalm 58:10-11, he writes in just this way: "The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.'" The key to this statement is the glory of God's righteousness that is displayed before the eyes of men. A. W. Pink further explains:

It was not the exercise of a spirit of malice, which took delight in seeing the destruction of their foes: no indeed, for in the Old Testament the divine command was, "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth" (Prov. 24:17). Instead, it was the heart bowing in worship before the governmental dealings of God, adoring that Justice which gave unto the wicked their due.⁷

If we are tempted to think such an attitude of glory in God's judgment is inappropriate to the New Testament age of grace, then we should consider the praising in heaven revealed in the last book of the Bible. For in the fall of Babylon the Great, the voices in heaven sing with delight: "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" (Rev. 18:20). Indeed, in heaven, souls set free from the motivations of sin, perfected in holiness, sing hallelujahs for the glory and power

⁷ Pink, *A Life of David*, 1:154.

displayed in God's judgment: "For his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.... Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever" (Rev. 19:1-3).

In David's case, we can conceive of at least two other worthy motives for his rejoicing in Nabal's demise. First, David must have seen in this affirmation of God's justice the future vindication of his own cause with wicked king Saul. Remember that David was still a hunted fugitive, restraining himself from violence while Saul's hatred continues to run free against him. In this way, God's judgment of Nabal may have inspired the resolutions we read from David in Psalm 37:7: "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!"

Added to this comfort to his faith, God's judgment must have relieved David in that his enemy had not fallen by his own sinful vengeance, as he previously had intended. Psalm 37 continues by urging us all to keep both hands and hearts free from malice:

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.

For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace" (Ps. 37:8-11).

FAITH REPAID WITH LIFE AND LOVE

In contrast to her husband's depraved folly, Abigail is an image of feminine virtue. What a calamity was a marriage to so worthless a man as Nabal for a woman like her. One suspects that Nabal's material wealth explains this union, perhaps through an injudicious arrangement on the part of Abigail's father (thus belying her name, which means "my father's joy"). How lamentable it is today when young Christian women give their hearts to ungodly men, simply because of their worldly attractions, facing as a result a lifetime of spiritual disunity and marital strife. Paul speaks on this vital matter in

forceful language: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). Still, through faith in the Lord, Abigail’s virtue had not been destroyed even in such a marriage. Blaikie comments: “luxury had not impaired the energy of her spirit, and wealth had not destroyed the regularity of her habits.”⁸

Abigail’s character also provides something of an ideal for Christian men who seek for a bride. Not only was Abigail cited for beauty, but more importantly she is noted for discretion and wisdom, generosity of spirit, humble servanthood, and biblical devotion. As Proverbs 31:10 exclaims of such a woman, “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” Young women would likewise do well to seek in Abigail a model for their own godly character. For all her outward beauty, it is mainly the beauty of holiness that shines forth from Abigail. “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,” concludes Proverbs 31, “but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”

Indeed, Abigail reveals the positive side of God’s certain judgment. Just as Nabal was repaid for his wickedness with dismay and death, Consider how many times a woman like her must have grieved the misery of her marriage. Her life with Nabal must often have seemed like a dreary prison. But humble faith and servantlike humility had gained their reward in a new life that would be filled with love. For David knew a treasure when he saw one, and he wasted no time following up on Nabal’s death with a proposal to the now-widowed Abigail: “David sent and spoke to Abigail to take her as his wife” (1 Sam. 25:39). His servants approached her and said, “David has sent us to you to take you to him as his wife” (1 Sam. 25:40). This form of proposal may not have measured up to today’s romantic standards, but coming from so great and good a man like David, who for all his own sins was “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), Abigail could only have been thrilled at God’s blessing.

⁸ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 385.

In responding, Abigail retained her humility and servant-like demeanor: “She rose and bowed with her face to the ground and said, ‘Behold, your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord’” (1 Sam. 25:41). Abigail not only would accept David’s proposal, but she would be a true wife for him in keeping with the servant-calling of a believer in the Lord. Mounting a donkey and taking her serving women with her, Abigail obeyed her new husband’s first command and followed David’s messengers in order to become his wife.

The chapter concludes with a statement that seems to sully the purity and joy of the occasion. On the one hand, we find that “Saul had given Michal his daughter, David’s wife, to Palti the son of Laish, who was of Gallim” (1 Sam. 25:44). Always vigilant to wound David in any way possible, Saul sought not only to afflict David’s heart with the painful thought of his wife being given to another man, but he probably also secured political arrangements advantageous to himself and injurious to David. On the other hand, “David also took Ahinoam of Jezreel” to be his wife along with Abigail (1 Sam. 25:43). However distressing it may have been for Abigail to find that she was one of two wives that David would take, this was not an unaccustomed practice for a man of David’s public stature in that time. Still, we should observe that David’s polygamy failed to uphold God’s design for marriage and would in the end lead to great harm both to David and his household.

The point that seems to be intended, however, is that God had repaid not only Abigail for her faith, but God had provided for David’s need as his servant continued to trust in him. Not only would David be compensated for his loss of his idolatrous first wife, Saul’s daughter Michal, giving him a woman of beauty and discretion like Abigail, but with these ties God provided David with resources of wealth and connections that would aid his rise among the people of Judah. An episode that began with frustration and shame, so that David very nearly fell into gross sin against the Lord, ended up by God’s grace with a source of refreshment, support, and discernment to sustain David in many a trial yet to come. God’s grace to David reveals a truth that David relayed in Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

NEW LIFE AS DAVID'S BRIDE

As we consider Abigail riding forth on her donkey to enter into David's marital love, we see a beautiful picture of the blessing that awaits all who look in faith to Jesus Christ, David's greater descendant. Abigail's earlier speech to David made clear that she believed God's promises about his glory and kingdom, referring to "all that good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel" (1 Sam. 25:30). Faith in Jesus is likewise belief in God's promises concerning his true Son and divine king. "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever," the Scripture says of him, "the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom" (Heb. 1:8). Abigail came to David knowing that as his bride she would reign with him in the day of God's fulfillment; we likewise look to Jesus knowing that we will reign with him as heirs of God's heavenly glory (Rom. 8:17). Thus, Matthew Henry remarks, "those who join themselves to Christ must be willing now to suffer with him, believing that hereafter they shall reign with him."⁹

Abigail left behind her former life – a life made sordid by association with corruption and sin – to begin a new life with God's anointed servant. In turning to Jesus Christ, we likewise turn our back upon the old life of sin, glad to suffer the loss of all things in this life for his sake, in order that we may bear his name in both present disgrace and eternal glory, sure that in his love we will be repaid with eternal life.

There is one more point of contact between Abigail's marriage to David and our salvation in Jesus Christ. How was it, after all, that Abigail thought to give her love to noble David? Because he had sent his servants with an invitation. You, too, have a personal invitation to enter into a relationship of love and salvation with Jesus Christ. His offer is contained in the gospel message, presented to you by Christ's servants the prophets and apostles in the Holy Scriptures. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). What a blessed occasion for Abigail when she learned of David's offer of love! How blessed, as well, is it for every sinner to receive and accept the saving message of Christ. Jesus says

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:329.

to us: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24).