

Revenge

Walter Scott once said, “Revenge, the sweetest morsel to the mouth that ever was cooked in hell.” He captured the two parts of revenge there: revenge feels good when we pursue it, but it is in the end destructive to us.

Revenge starts early: There is the revenge we see in the crib – with toddlers biffing the one that biffed him. Revenge sometimes goes on beyond the grave: people often take revenge on others in their last will and testament.

Of course revenge takes many forms. There is the outright, crude revenge of gang violence getting each other back. There is the instant revenge of road rage with complete strangers. There are nations and whole ethnicities taking revenge on others for pains and atrocities experienced.

But revenge takes more subtle forms as well. There are spouses who take revenge on each other in a kind of cold war that goes on for years: insults and barbs at opportune moments, withheld affection, or even unfaithfulness in revenge for unfaithfulness. People take revenge on each other at work: for being slighted, not promoted, unrecognised, and sabotage the company, or sell secrets to the competition. Many eating disorders are often a person taking revenge on someone abusive, usually a parent, by destroying one's own body with cruelty.

Sometimes people take revenge on others by proxy. They take revenge on a random man because of mistreatment by a male, they take revenge on a random black man because of evil done to them by another black man. I've sat in classrooms where it seemed the teacher was taking revenge on a pupil that reminded them of someone else. I've watched groups take revenge on the pretty girl in a group or the clever boy because of sheer envy.

Revenge is hardly rational, and when we give vent to it, it is seldom controlled. Instead of righting wrongs, it almost always causes more wrongs. It doesn't balance the scales, it simply warps them altogether. Revenge brings short-term satisfaction and long-term regret.

Revenge is a good thing gone wrong. Revenge is the good desire for justice turned wild. It's when the desire for justice bursts its banks. We want wrongs to be put right, and we start to see to it ourselves. But revenge is satanic in the end: it is the spirit of the rebel angel.

There is only one final cure for revenge, and that is to entrust real justice to the real Judge. Once you do that, you leave the case with Him, and refuse to take it back.

Kings are often destroyed by their desire for revenge. Before David became king, God needed to teach David the importance of not avenging himself, of entrusting justice to God. In ancient times, the King was the final court of the land, and if that king was vengeful and selfish, all justice in the land would be skewed.

In this account, we'll see something played out which occurs in all of our lives. First, a provocation to revenge – some temptation, some situation that makes us feel injured and crying out for justice. Second, the presentation of revenge – the beginning of rage starting to manifest in David. But third, the prevention of revenge – an escape from his own self-destructive anger that is presented to David. First Corinthians 10:13 says: No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God *is* faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*. (1 Cor. 10:13).

When we are seeking revenge, we feel out of control, and we may be, but there is a way of escape before we get there.

I. The Provocation to Revenge

1 Samuel 25:1 Then Samuel died; and the Israelites gathered together and lamented for him, and buried him at his home in Ramah. And David arose and went down to the Wilderness of Paran.

2 Now *there was* a man in Maon whose business *was* in Carmel, and the man *was* very rich. He had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. And he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. 3 The name of the man *was* Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. And *she was* a woman of good understanding and beautiful appearance; but the man *was* harsh and evil in *his* doings. And he *was of the house of* Caleb.

David has been on the run for about three years, and he receives the difficult news that Samuel has died. The one man who prayed for him, encouraged him, supported him is now gone. He was probably 90 years old, if we've calculated the dates correctly, and so the John the Baptist of the Old Testament, who prepared the way for the true king has passed on. There is a major funeral for Samuel in his home town, but likely neither Saul nor David goes. Saul had broken ties with Samuel, and David could not risk that kind of public appearance. But when he hears, he withdraws to the wilderness.

Eventually David ends up in Maon in Carmel. This is about 25 kilometres from where they were in En-Gedi. Again, it is the territory of Judah, close to Carmel. Actually, Saul set up a monument to himself in Carmel, after he had half-obeyed the command to attack the Amalekites.

In this area is a very wealthy man, with three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He commands a very large household with many employees. His name is Nabal, which in Hebrew means fool. Now when you know the meaning of a name, and it is unpleasant, you don't typically give that to your son. One of my friends at school had a name which is fairly common, but its actual meaning is cowshed, a barn. Probably most English parents don't know that's what it means when they give the name. So how did Nabal end up with this name? You would not name your son "Fool" if you knew the meaning of it. It is possible that he was from non-Israelite stock. Some other Near Eastern languages have a similar word which means archer, and even 'chosen one of the god'. Furthermore, he was from Caleb, and Caleb was actually a Kenezite who were Edomites.

The text tells us that this man of great wealth had, very likely through that wealth, got himself a beautiful and wise wife. Likely by Oriental custom, she was married to this man by the decision of her father. But by contrast, he was harsh and evil. A cruel, unyielding man, who acted without ethics and godliness. F. B. Meyer comments, "It is remarkable how many Abigails get married to Nabals. God-fearing women, tender and gentle in their sensibilities, high-minded and noble in their ideals, become tied in an indissoluble union with men for whom they can have no true affinity"

It happens to be the time of year when sheep are shorn, which in Israel was Spring and Early Autumn. It was always a time of joy, accompanied by feasting and celebration.

It is hard to feed 600 men who have cast their lot in with you, and David has been trying to do so by any honest means. So one of the methods they'd tried was to voluntarily protect someone else's animals, hoping for the ancient equivalent of a tip.

4 When David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep, 5 David sent ten young men; and David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, go to Nabal, and greet him in my name. 6 "And thus you shall say to him who lives *in prosperity*: 'Peace *be* to you, peace to your house, and peace to all that you have! 7 `Now I have heard that you have shearers. Your shepherds were with us, and we did not hurt them, nor was there anything missing from them all the while they were in Carmel. 8 `Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let *my* young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever comes to your hand to your servants and to your son David.'" 9 So when David's young men

came, they spoke to Nabal according to all these words in the name of David, and waited.

With such large flocks, it was not uncommon to suffer losses. Wild tribes, thieves, attacks by Philistines, or even wild animals could hack away at your profits quite severely. No one with flocks like Nabal's expected to come to shearing time and find that he had not suffered a single loss. He is probably even happier than usual: he'd never had such a good year.

But that was largely thanks to David. David's men had decided to protect the shepherds and their flocks, hoping that they might get a small recompense. It seems Nabal joined his sheep-shearers out in the field in this time of feasting, so David sent his 10 men to greet Nabal there. Perhaps David didn't go himself, to prevent it from being awkward and overbearing. And it's a good thing he didn't, as we'll find out.

David sends his men with a friendly greeting: Shalom, shalom, shalom. And now David is simply invoking a custom that was common in the day. It was common for the owner to set aside a portion of the profits to whomever had protected his shepherds. It was rather like tipping a waiter. There was no law that you had to do it, and David had not signed a contract with Nabal. But he had done Nabal a genuine service at his own expense, and Nabal had clearly profited by it. Now he is asking Nabal to show the customary gratitude out of his enormous profits. David uses the term of respect, “your son”, showing humility before the powerful, and probably older Nabal.

But all of that had little impact upon the selfish and wicked heart of Nabal.

10 Then Nabal answered David's servants, and said, "Who *is* David, and who *is* the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who break away each one from his master. 11 "Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give *it* to men when I do not know where they *are* from?" 12 So David's young men turned on their heels and went back; and they came and told him all these words.

Nabal starts with a common response of a selfish man in power to a helpless man: “Who are you? I don't know you! I don't owe you anything, because no one can vouch for you!”

But then he takes it further, implying that David is essentially a runaway slave from Saul. He is a rebel on the run, a child who ran away from home now knocking on other people's doors begging for bread.

In his next sentence, in the Hebrew, he uses eight grammatical expressions of the first person singular in this one sentence. I, my bread, my water, my meat, that I've killed, for my shearers. You can tell what is important in this man's life. Possessiveness and greed have poisoned his entire worldview.

The ten men have just been insulted and humiliated in the worst possible way. In the Hebrew, it is literally, the men “whirled round on their way”, turned on their heels and went back to David to report.

In how many ways was Jesus provoked to revenge, all the way to the Cross, and especially when on it?

II. The Presentation of Revenge

13 Then David said to his men, "Every man gird on his sword." So every man girded on his sword, and David also girded on his sword. And about four hundred men went with David, and two hundred stayed with

the supplies.

David is angry beyond words. He is ready to literally murder. Every man, gird his sword. These are basically the words of a gang leader ready to take revenge on the rivals who have insulted them.

Remember, this is the same man who has repeatedly refused to retaliate or fight back when Saul has accused him, slandered him, tried to kill him. He has been a model of patience. He had Saul within his grasp and let him go, and even bowed before him.

What has happened to that David?

Often the temptation to give in to anger is strongest when we are weary, and frankly hungry. When our bodies are worn out by fatigue, overwork, lack of sleep and sickness, we become more and more testy, irritable, and likely to give in to anger. David's men, as we'll see, worked night and day protecting these sheep. They are tired, worn out from running from Saul, worn out from sleeping outside, worn out from being on constant alert.

Often the temptation to give in to anger is strongest when it comes after repeated provocations. We swallow one, and bear another, and endure a third, but with each one, the load grows heavier and heavier. Nabal's provocation comes after a series of provocations by Saul, and David is near breaking point. Sometimes we can endure a lot of grief from certain people, but then if we don't watch ourselves, find ourselves choosing to give in to road rage with a stranger, or a tantrum with a shop assistant or a stranger on the phone.

Often the temptation to give in to anger is strongest when hope or expectation is dashed. When we were hoping for some relief, some respite, some reward, and it is removed again, our hope turns to hate, our desire turns to depression and rage. David has been disappointed again and again. But here, protecting such a wealthy man, he really had a justifiable hope that this man would spare just a little bit of extra to feed David's hungry men. Nabal was extremely wealthy with far more than he needed, David's men were desperate fugitives who survived on what they were able to scavenge. They've obviously been living on meagre rations, and looking forward to some lamb, some mutton kebabs, and now that hope is dashed.

Whatever the reason, David takes two-thirds of his men, 400 men, and heads to Nabal. Look at what he says to himself, as they head out.

21 Now David had said, "Surely in vain I have protected all that this *fellow* has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that *belongs* to him. And he has repaid me evil for good. 22 "May God do so, and more also, to the enemies of David, if I leave one male of all who *belong* to him by morning light."

David is speaking the empty, despairing words of the angry. "It was for nothing that I did what was right! It was a total waste of time! No one cares or regards or sees the good that I did! And now, not only so, but having done him good, he is repaying me evil!"

You remember in the last chapter Saul told David that he was clearly the future king because he had repaid Saul good for evil. Saul had repaid David evil for good. David's men wanted him to repay Saul evil for evil, but David choose to repay good for evil. But this is now a David controlled by the flesh, not by the Spirit. Nabal is repaying him evil for good, so David will now repay evil with evil.

It is one of the hardest things to take: when you serve others, and they take you for granted, worse, turn around and slander, and abuse and betray you.

And at this moment, we should think of some of the most powerful words ever spoken. “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” Crucifying Jesus was the ultimate in repaying evil for good, while as He hung there, it was the ultimate in repaying good for evil.

But David is not heeding conscience. He is in pursuit of revenge, and the man pursuing revenge gets angrier as he does so. He invokes a kind of vow: may God slaughter all my enemies, if I don't kill every male in Nabal's household. In fact, David uses pretty coarse language here, an epithet for male that was used only for curses. When you're angry, you don't watch your language either.

It isn't saying much, but David doesn't plan to massacre the women and children, like Saul did at Nob. He is going to kill every able-bodied man who is part of Nabal's household.

But God loves David and is going to give him a way of escape.

III. The Prevention of Revenge

14 Now one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, saying, "Look, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master; and he reviled them. 15 "But the men *were* very good to us, and we were not hurt, nor did we miss anything as long as we accompanied them, when we were in the fields. 16 "They were a wall to us both by night and day, all the time we were with them keeping the sheep. 17 "Now therefore, know and consider what you will do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his household. For he *is such* a scoundrel that *one* cannot speak to him."

One of Nabal's employees quickly runs to the one sensible person in the household: Abigail. He tells Abigail what David's men did, and how Nabal responded. Maybe the servant knew what was coming when he saw the looks in the eyes of those ten men from David. After all, it's a dumb idea to insult a posse of 600 armed and hungry men.

Now for a moment, consider Abigail's position. This could be her opportunity to finally be rid of a husband who has no doubt poured much of the same abuse and contempt on her. She understands what is happening. She could have responded with a “Oh, well, I'd better go to my room and pray about this!” As the thundering hoofbeats of David's men are approaching, with shouts of “Revenge! Death to Nabal”, she could have done a false piety and been praying “Lord, if it is your will that my husband survive this, Thy will be done!”

But she doesn't do that. Look at her response.

18 Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred *loaves* of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep already dressed, five seahs of roasted *grain*, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded *them* on donkeys. 19 And she said to her servants, "Go on before me; see, I am coming after you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal. 20 So it was, as she rode on the donkey, that she went down under cover of the hill; and there were David and his men, coming down toward her, and she met them.

Abigail gathers up a lot of food on a lot of donkeys. Was she being disobedient in doing this? No, she was the manager of the household. She was covering for his mismanagement, paying a debt that Nabal refused to pay. To save a little money, her husband was foolishly jeopardizing the lives of multiple people in his household. She knows her husband is not approachable, and that it will literally be the death of him this day. She knows her husband's weaknesses. So she covers his weaknesses in an act of gracious protection.

Providentially, her train of servants and donkeys meets David's coming down the hill. The scene reminds us of Jacob's reunion with Esau, with his fighting men, and Esau's right to take revenge on Jacob, with Jacob sending gift after gift to placate Esau.

And now, she performs one of the wisest speeches in all of Scripture.

23 Now when Abigail saw David, she hastened to dismount from the donkey, fell on her face before David, and bowed down to the ground. 24 So she fell at his feet and said: "On me, my lord, *on* me *let* this iniquity *be!* And please let your maidservant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your maidservant. 25 "Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name *is*, so *is* he: Nabal *is* his name, and folly *is* with him.

But I, your maidservant, did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent. 26 "Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, since the LORD has held you back from coming to bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hand, now then, let your enemies and those who seek harm for my lord be as Nabal. 27 "And now this present which your maidservant has brought to my lord, let it be given to the young men who follow my lord. 28 "Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant. For the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord fights the battles of the LORD, and evil is not found in you throughout your days. 29 "Yet a man has risen to pursue you and seek your life, but the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; and the lives of your enemies He shall sling out, *as from* the pocket of a sling. 30 "And it shall come to pass, when the LORD has done for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you ruler over Israel, 31 "that this will be no grief to you, nor offense of heart to my lord, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself. But when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your maidservant."

Abigail bows before David and acknowledges him as the true king, showing faith. She uses the word 'lord' fourteen times. Tactfully, she both takes responsibility for Nabal's foolishness, while at the same time also making sure she points out how foolish and sinful he was.

She then brilliantly confronts David with the long-term consequences of his anger. If he avenges himself and murders every male in Nabal's household, he will actually give ammunition to those who say David is a thug and a rebel. If he goes ahead with this, he will not come to the throne blameless. He will have the regret of having been a vigilante, a thug who settled personal scores with violence.

Alfred Ederseim writes, "The fact that David was God's anointed, on whom the kingdom would devolve, seems now to have been the conviction of all who were godly in Israel. They knew it, and they expected it. Equally strong was their belief that David's present, as his future mission, was simply to contend for God and for His people. But most important of all was the deep feeling prevalent, that David must not try to right himself, nor work his own deliverance."

Abigail even uses the image of a shepherd in verse 29. She acknowledges that Saul is after David. Then she says, "but the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; and the lives of your enemies He shall sling out, *as from* the pocket of a sling.

That phrase probably refers to a pouch of little stones which shepherds used to keep a tally of their sheep. She's saying, that David will be numbered among the Lord's saints, one of God's people, whereas by contrast, David's enemies will be like the stones which shepherds used to sling out when protecting the sheep. David would have known both images very well.

This woman is a very wise communicator. She is tactful, humble, but also direct and strong. She is confronting a strong leader, asking him to stop and change course, but she does so with such humility, meekness and godliness that is irresistible.

Abigail is really a picture of that perfect wife of Proverbs 31: she is submissive, she is protective of her home, but she is also self-directed, takes the initiative, acts independently in a godly way while

managing large amounts of money and resources.

Abigail is David's way of escape from the temptation to carry out his anger. She is God's messenger to say: repent and stop. David could have brushed her aside, and decided that he needed to show his men how powerful he was. He could have inflated his pride, and shown that nothing will make David change his mind when David is angry. But David's response once again shows why he was a man after God's own heart.

32 Then David said to Abigail: "Blessed *is* the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! 33 "And blessed *is* your advice and blessed *are* you, because you have kept me this day from coming to bloodshed and from avenging myself with my own hand. 34 "For indeed, as the LORD God of Israel lives, who has kept me back from hurting you, unless you had hastened and come to meet me, surely by morning light no males would have been left to Nabal!"

35 So David received from her hand what she had brought him, and said to her, "Go up in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and respected your person."

Do you remember how Saul acted when Jonathan tried to calm him down? He threw a spear at his own son! But David here shows teachability. He is not so large in his own eyes that he cannot be rebuked and taught by a godly woman.

He recognises that Yahveh has sent her and spoken to his conscience. Yahveh sent her as the way of escape from his own temptation to avenge himself. He blesses her, and blesses her advice. You've persuaded me, David says. I've listened to you, and accepted your advice.

He receives the gifts from her hands and sends her off with a blessing.

Of course, David hasn't gotten revenge. Does that mean Nabal gets off scot-free? Is there no justice? Is the Christian life one of continually accepting wrongs? No, the story concludes to show us what happens when you refuse anger and leave the justice to the Lord.

36 Now Abigail went to Nabal, and there he was, holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal's heart *was* merry within him, for he *was* very drunk; therefore she told him nothing, little or much, until morning light. 37 So it was, in the morning, when the wine had gone from Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became *like* a stone. 38 Then it came about, *after* about ten days, that the LORD struck Nabal, and he died.

Abigail doesn't tell Nabal when he is drunk, because it would be dishonest, and he wouldn't remember. She tells him when he is sober, because she is not going to hide these things from him or lie to him. At that moment, Nabal has what appears to be a stroke. What caused this? Was it his pride and anger that she had acted without his knowledge? Was it shock in realising how close he'd come to death? Was it fear that she had helped King Saul's enemy, who was known to kill entire towns if you did so? We don't know, but he has some kind of stroke, and ten days later, he dies.

39 So when David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Blessed *be* the LORD, who has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Nabal, and has kept His servant from evil! For the LORD has returned the wickedness of Nabal on his own head."

David here praises God's justice. He had left vindication to the Lord. He had left it up to God to take care of how evil Nabal had been, and God did.

But now, what about this beautiful, intelligent, submissive and shrewdly wise woman Abigail? Why, she is fit to be a future queen. She had said in her speech to David that he should remember her when he came into his kingdom, much like the thief said on the Cross. So now, David proposes to this widow.

And David sent and proposed to Abigail, to take her as his wife. 40 When the servants of David had come to Abigail at Carmel, they spoke to her saying, "David sent us to you, to ask you to become his wife." 41 Then she arose, bowed her face to the earth, and said, "Here is your maidservant, a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord." 42 So Abigail rose in haste and rode on a donkey, attended by five of her maidens; and she followed the messengers of David, and became his wife. 43 David also took Ahinoam of Jezreel, and so both of them were his wives. 44 But Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Palti the son of Laish, who was from Gallim. (1 Sam. 25:1-44)

Michal, David's first wife had been illegally given to another man, Palti of Laish. Apparently, Saul wanted to cut off every claim to the throne. It would have been a fairy tale ending if David had chosen such a wise woman, Abigail to be his future queen. But sadly, David went the route of many disobedient kings, and multiplied wives to himself. By this stage, it is Ahinoam and Abigail, but David will go on to add Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah, Bathsheba, and according to 2 Samuel 5, multiple wives and concubines. This will be the great undoing of David's kingdom, as it was Solomon's.

But as we leave David, we see a man who has escaped the madness of revenge. He has escaped ruining his own life, maybe even jeopardising the kingdom. He escaped it by trusting to the justice of God, choosing to forgive based upon someone else taking care of the debt. He escaped it by trusting in the one who would ultimately pay all debts on a cross and say, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."