

Abigail: A Bible Study
By Adalia R. Gutiérrez Lee

Theme Scriptures:

- 1 Samuel 25:1-32
- "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," (Prov. 15:1 NIV)

I was born in a home where love, compassion, understanding, respect, and many other beautiful feelings were nurtured on a daily basis. My parents protected us, probably without always even knowing, from the hostility that prevailed in our surroundings. In Tijuana, Mexico, where I have been a missionary for almost ten years, violence is a daily affair and our work is not only to placate hatred and crime, but to build goodwill and peace among humanity by starting in our own homes.

The Story

Nabal and Abigail were a married couple who were very wealthy. Nabal was "surly and mean," (v. 3). The Scripture confirms his character as it explains the meaning of his name: "his name means fool, and folly goes with him," (v. 25).

1. The story begins by describing Nabal's wealth and explains that it is sheep-shearing time. David, who is in the desert, sends some of his men to Nabal to ask for "whatever you can find for [us]," (v. 8) knowing that:

- a) It was a custom to have feasts at the sheep-shearing (1 Sam. 13:24), for wool was one of the staple commodities of Canaan.
- b) David's message was delivered with a great deal of courtesy and respect (1 Sam. 25:6).
- c) David's soldiers were a guard to Nabal's shepherds when the bands of the Philistines robbed the threshing-floors and would have robbed the sheep-folds (1 Sam. 23:1).

Because of this history, and due to cultural traditions, David knew that Nabal owed him the courtesy of providing for the needs of David's men. When David's men did as they were told, however, Nabal responded only with harsh words and a lack of hospitality. Nabal's men, ashamed of Nabal's behavior, told Abigail what had happened (v. 14). They knew that David was upset and, even as they spoke, arming himself for battle, so they asked Abigail to act. Everyone in Nabal's household knew his personality; as they said to her, Nabal was "such a wicked man that no one could say a word to him" (v. 17).

2. Abigail knows her household reality; she does not try to persuade Nabal to do the right thing and be kind to David's men. Instead, she acts immediately and packs an abundance of food to take to David (v. 18). Abigail encounters David on the road and, on her knees, begs him to forgive her husband's behavior. Her apology to David invites him to forgive the wrong done to him by Nabal, so that when David becomes the king of great nations he shall not have the "staggering burden of needless bloodshed," (v. 31) on his head.

The proverb, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," is advice that Abigail applies very well in this situation, but she does not do it with her husband. Rather, she runs to David who was ready to kill every man in Nabal's household (v. 22). Instead of Nabal asking forgiveness, Abigail asks for forgiveness on his behalf. In return, David accepts from her hand what she had brought him and says, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request," (v. 35).

3. After Abigail comes home, she waits for Nabal to be sober to explain to him what had just happened. Women who have been victims of domestic abuse learn how to "read" their spouses' behaviors. In so many homes where alcohol and drugs might intensify the damage that a violent spouse can cause, women and children learn when to be quiet, and when to softly speak, even though they might be terrified of the outcome.

This story ends with God's provisional intervention. Nabal's heart fails after hearing the story, and ten days later "the LORD struck Nabal and he died" (v. 38).

Some Lessons to Learn:

1. Nabal reminds me of many of the husbands whose wives have ended up at our shelter. No one can talk to them. They have the need to always be right and to blame everybody else for their problems. They can be extremely jealous, selfish, and self-centered. They can't hear any reason beside their own, and seem to always be on the lookout for a reason to get upset at anyone or anything.
2. Abigail's story is also the story of many women at our shelter. They put themselves in the position of seeking forgiveness from those who have been hurt by their husband's words and actions. Tired of trying to be heard and appreciated by their husbands, they run to look for help and mercy from others. Many times, like Abigail, wives have been isolated by their husbands' behavior and are ashamed of their husbands' actions. Like Abigail, these women blame themselves; they humiliate themselves to the dust (v. 23) in order to find grace in somebody's eyes. They do not think highly of themselves and feel they are to blame for anything that happens to them or their children.
3. This is a drastic story of domestic violence. Like many abused women, Abigail will bear the consequences of her husband's behavior and therefore takes the responsibility to make amends. Abigail finds a way to stand up for herself and her household and to look for solutions to placate David's anger. As a result, God acted in her life in a very unique way, and David ultimately took Abigail as his wife after Nabal died. Not many abused women feel God's direct intervention in their lives. They do not know how to escape, where to go if they do, or how are they going to take care of their families once they leave their husbands. Not many are as wealthy as Abigail, or witness God's "direct" intervention in their troubles.

Perhaps many of you, like me, were born in homes where we were nurtured with a great amount of love and felt protected by our parents from the harshness of other homes' realities. This story might not apply directly to our life circumstances, but it applies to many women around the world, Christians and non-Christians alike.

As Abigail was able to build goodwill and give a gentle answer to a man who was ready to kill everyone in her household, we are called to find that courage and goodwill to build peace in our own homes. Far from judging those who are victims of domestic abuse, we ought to help them find that gentle answer. We can be God's direct intervention (with our prayers, support, and solidarity) that will allow them to save their lives and live without fear again.

Questions for group discussion

1. How do you identify yourself, or a relative/girlfriend, of yours in this story?
2. How would you like God to intervene in your (or her) story?
3. What can you learn from Abigail's example in this text?

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