

1 Samuel 25:2-25; 32-35
Softening of a Raging Heart
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When he was in middle school, like most other students, Alec rode the bus to and from school. Only, unlike most of the other children, Alec's bus-ride was almost always a traumatic experience. Day in and day out, Alec was picked on and tormented by another boy from the next grade up, sending him home with tears in his eyes.

Finally, after a few months of this routine, his dad had seen enough. "This stops now. Alec," he said, "tomorrow when this boy starts to pick on you, I want you to ball up your fist as tightly as you can, and when he starts in on you, you wind up and hit him as hard as you can right in his jaw—in Jesus' name."

Alec—who would go on to be my college roommate—came from a sweet, loving Christian family. Fighting was never the answer in that house. But in this case, I suppose, his dad figured that the ends justified the means.

And I love how he tells this story: "That night my mother, who was as quiet and demur as a church mouse and just as gentle, did battle in a way that I may not ever understand. That night my mom stayed up all night long, praying that I would not have to fight. The next morning, when I got on the bus, that boy was not sitting in his regular spot. The same in the afternoon. In fact, from that day on, that boy never bothered me again." Turns out James 5:16 is true, **that the prayers of the righteous availeth much.**

There are people in our lives who possess a spiritual beauty and power, that can change a life. God's light just seems to stream through them—like light streaming through stained glass. This morning, we are going to look at a story in the life of David in which God turned his situation around and kept him from a very bad decision. And it happened because of the iridescent spiritual beauty of a woman named Abigail.

So turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Samuel. Today, we'll be reading from chapter 25, verses 2-25 and 32-35.

Then David rose and went down to the wilderness of Paran. And there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel. Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved; he was a Calebite. David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep. So David sent ten young men. And David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, and go to Nabal and greet him in my name. And thus you shall greet him: 'Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have. I hear that you have shearers. Now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing all the time they were in Carmel. 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 you have at hand to your servants and to your son David.'"

When David's young men came, they said all this to Nabal in the name of David, and then they waited. And Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" So David's young men turned away and came back and told him all this. And David said to his men, "Every man strap on his sword!" And every man of them strapped on his sword. David also strapped on his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage.

But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "Behold, David sent messengers out of the wilderness to greet our master, and he railed at them. Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when we were in the fields, as long as we went with them. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Now therefore know this and consider what you should do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his house, and he is such a worthless man that one cannot speak to him."

Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two skins of wine and five sheep already prepared and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on donkeys. And she said to her young men, "Go on before me; behold, I come after you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal. And as she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, behold, David and his men came down toward her, and she met them. Now David had said, "Surely in vain have I guarded all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him, and he has returned me evil for good. God do so to the enemies of David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him."

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, "On me alone, my lord, be the guilt. Please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him. But I your servant did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent..."

And David said to Abigail, "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 working salvation with my own hand! 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." 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."

David and his men are still on the run from Saul, and while they're in the wilderness, rather than just sitting around, David finds ways of helping out the locals. Turns out, David and his men were the very first neighborhood watch brigade.

One local in particular is a guy named Nabal of Carmel, a wealthy herdsman whose flock was off being tended by one of his hired hands—and vulnerable. So David and his guys make themselves useful by protecting the flock. It says in verse 16: **They were a wall both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep.**

In exchange for their services, David sends a few of his guys over to Nabal with a simple request—some meager provisions of food and water. A very reasonable request.

Now what you need to know about Nabal is described in verse 3, and I like the way the New RSV translates it. It says, **the man was surly and mean.** And when David's request comes back denied, he flies off the handle. David is mad! He wants Nabal's head on a platter, and he was going to get it.

So David and his band of now not-so-merry men set off for Carmel with revenge in their eyes. You see, David is determined to return vulgarity for vulgarity, violence for violence. David lost his cool, but in so doing, he also lost sense of who he was and what he was anointed to do.

Do you have those triggers in your life, hot-button items that send you off the hook? We've all had moments when we've lost our cool and slipped into irrational and erratic behavior. That's why most marriage counselors recommend taking a time-out when tempers flare; we're not our true selves. Eugene Peterson writes, "David was on the verge of becoming another Saul."

That is, until Abigail catches word of her husband's offense and David's revenge. She ran to find David, and when she did, fell on her face: "Please, please, please don't do this. It is not befitting of the King of Israel." In this woman, we see one of the great tensions of our lives: Is there any force in our lives that has the ability to overcome the sins of zeal, anger, and revenge? At this moment, David was beside himself, anger and revenge was dripping from his lips; he definitely wasn't thinking straight. Until this woman—the Bible calls her beautiful and discerning—stepped into his life.

Sometimes God's grace takes on the face of someone or something who keeps us from being our worst.

There's another great story that shares this theme. It's one of my favorite novels, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Did you know that Dostoevsky wrote his great novel just four years after two other iconic novels, *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, and Victor Hugo's great *Les Miserables*? And all three of them share a central thread in that all three main characters idolize and look up to the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte—who was the very embodiment of zeal and power.

Crime and Punishment begins with a young man, a 23-year-old atheist student by the name of Raskalnikov. He, like almost everyone else in the novel, is desperately poor. So when we meet him, he is consumed by thinking of all the great things he could do...if only he didn't live in such destitute poverty. But because he is so poor, he believes he doesn't have the ability to leave his mark on society, to write his great paper, so in many ways he becomes cynical and embittered. This fixation drives him to anger and resentment.

In spite of this, however, Raskalnikov still has glimmers of virtue. In one scene, he sees a young girl being taken advantage of and comes to her aid. Then in another, he meets a former military hero,

who's become a drunkard and destitute, and gives him some of his money to help his family. It's this drunkard who has a very lovely young daughter, who will later become a pivotal character; her name is Sonia. Parenthetically, the family was so poor that instead of being able to devote herself to prayer and serving God in the monastery, they force Sonia to become a prostitute.

So within Raskalnikov is a seed of virtue and a desire to do good. But then he finds himself in a café and overhears two students talking about a woman who is the pawnbroker. "She's a wicked old krone, no good to anyone; on the contrary harmful to everyone. She doesn't even know who she is, why is she alive." They continue, there is so much good that could be done with the money that she's doomed to the monastery. She'll probably die tomorrow, (wink wink). Now the irony is that just the day before, Raskalnikov had thought of all the good he could do if he robbed this old miserly woman. So he hatches a plan to do it. But the plan goes wrong, and not only does Raskalnikov kill the old woman, but with her was her younger slow-witted sister who she looked after—albeit poorly. And she becomes collateral damage.

So now this young man, who had such high aspirations to do such good in the world, stoops to the lowest level to achieve them—murdering and stealing this woman's money. And for much of the rest of the novel, we follow Raskalnikov around, listening to his inner monologue. Interestingly, one of the things that makes this such a difficult novel to read is the fact that the only character we get to know is this one young man. At least with *Les Misérables*, when you get tired of reading about one, you can move to one of the other gripping characters. But in *Crime and Punishment* there's only one, only Raskalnikov.

So it would appear that he's committed the perfect crime, no one sees him, no one has any clue he's the one. In fact, at one point he finds himself talking to the investigator Petrovich who says, we've found a man who we think we'll convict, but I'm not convinced he did it. But we'll probably send him to Siberia.

As things get more and more intense, he goes to Sonia and explains what he's done. He tells her, "I killed the old woman, of course it was a bad thing to do, but I did it (for some greater good he believed). I only killed a useless, nasty, pernicious louse." But, of course, Sonia is horrified and says, "a human being." Raskalnikov continues to try and justify his actions with some greater good until Sonia can take it no more. "Be still, be still," she says, "you deserted God, and God has stricken you."

It's the goodness of Sonia who convinces him to turn himself in, and then he's sentenced to prison in Siberia. But a beautiful thing happens. Sonia follows Raskalnikov to Siberia. She keeps him alive. She stays outside the prison camp, and brings him food. She becomes beloved by all the prisoners, she tutors them, she takes care of correspondence for them. But Raskalnikov is still bitter because he believes she forced him to confess.

But one day, Sonia came to the edge of the camp and this is what it says: "She gave her hand to him timidly, sometimes not at all. As if fearing he would push it away. He always took her hand as if with loathing, always met her with vexation, sometimes loathing. There were occasions that she trembled before him and went away in deep grief. But this time their hands did not separate, he glanced at her quickly and fleetingly. How it happened he did not know, it was as if something lifted him and flung him down at her feet. He wept, embraced her knees. She jumped back, trembling, her face went numb, but all at once she understood everything. Infinite happiness lit up her eyes, for there was no

longer any doubt that he loved her. He loved her infinitely, and that at last the moment had come. They wanted to speak, but could not. Tears were in their eyes, they were both pale and thin. But in those pale sick faces were already shown the dawn of a renewed future, complete resurrection. They were resurrected by love.”

And here is one of the last lines of the novel. “She had given him her New Testament when he entered the prison, and under his pillow lay the gospels. He took the book out mechanically, it belonged to her. It was the same one, from which she had read to him a text that she wanted him to know, it was the raising of Lazarus. He thought that when he entered she would hound him with religion, would be forever talking about the Gospels and forcing books on him. But to his greatest amazement, she never once spoke of it, never once even offered him the Gospels.”

But a thought flashed in him: “I wonder can her convictions not be my convictions now? Her feelings, her aspirations, at least...”

And he ends the book this way. “But here begins a new account, the account of a man’s gradual renewal, the account of his gradual regeneration, his gradual transition from one world to another, his acquaintance with a new, hitherto completely unknown reality. It might make the subject of a new story—but our present story is ended.”

What is it that softened a crazed, revenge-minded David? I’ll give you a hint, it was the same thing that happened to the hardened and despondent criminal in Raskolnikov. Beauty. First Samuel describes Abigail as being a woman of beauty and discernment. Sonia, too, was a wise in her discernment and beautiful in her appearance.

What Abigail says, in effect, is “vengeance is not yours, David—that’s God’s business. Your job is not to prove how strong you are, your job is to discover how strong and faithful God is. Just because Nabal is a fool doesn’t mean you need to become one too.” David was in the wilderness, standing face to face with the beauty of Abigail to learn about grace.

And what shines in them is not so much the beauty of their physical appearance, but the beauty of God’s mercy embodied in a physical and present being. It’s grace staring us in the face. That’s what David saw; that’s what Raskolnikov came to see.

There is always going to be someone who offends us, there is always going to be that temptation to exact revenge. In Matthew 13, Jesus came between a woman caught in adultery and some religious men who were bent on revenge, and by his grace he stood in between them, keeping these men from doing something they’d regret and inviting this woman to see her true purpose, her true beauty.

When we’re presented with something beautiful—a child, a friend, a stranger, a song—we see Abigail, we see Jesus: God’s mercy and grace standing before us.

And I want to close with this quote from Eugene Peterson: Beauty releases light into our awareness so that we’re conscious of the beauty of the Lord. “It makes icons of us all. Each of us becomes a work of art, reflecting God’s glory.”

Let’s pray:

Beautiful One, open our eyes to the transformative mercy of your grace. Life has a way of hardening us, our experiences and the things that don't go as we plan, can make us callous and cynical. But in gentle beauty of the Rabbi from Galilee, come into us once again and soften us toward one another. Make us your instruments of peace, so that in being freed from our sin we might point others to the way of freedom as well. This we ask in the merciful and beautiful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.