

Who was Nabal in the Bible?

Nabal is noteworthy for the brief interaction he had with David while David was on the run from King Saul. The account of David and Nabal is found in 1 Samuel 25. Nabal was from the clan of Caleb, and his name means “fool”—a fact that suggests Nabal may have been a nickname he earned by his “harsh and evil” behavior (verse 3, BSB). Nabal lived near the town of Maoen in the hill country of Judea and possessed thousands of sheep and goats that he pastured near Carmel. Nabal was extremely wealthy; however, his greatest asset was his beautiful and intelligent wife, Abigail.

In his quest to stay one step ahead of the murderous Saul, David had acquired a significant number of men who traveled with him and believed in his destiny as the future king of Israel. They provided for themselves by defending farms and towns from raiders and thieves. It was common practice for a wealthy landowner to provide sustenance for the men who guarded his property. So Nabal should not have been surprised David requested provisions for his men from Nabal (1 Samuel 25:4-9).

An honest and noble man would have been glad to offer provisions to the brave men who had guarded his herdsmen, flocks, and shepherds for weeks. A young man in Nabal’s employ described David’s men as “a wall around us, both day and night, the whole time we were herding our sheep near them” (1 Samuel 25:16). But Nabal was not an honest and noble man. He responded to David’s request with sneering arrogance and disdain: “Who is this fellow David?” Nabal asked David’s messengers. “Who does this son of Jesse think he is? There are lots of servants these days who run away from their masters. Should I take my bread and my water and my meat that I’ve slaughtered for my shearers and give it to a band of outlaws who come from who knows where?” (verses 10-11, NLT).

Compounding the outrage of Nabal's statement was the fact that, as an influential man in Israel, Nabal would have known who David was. The prophet Samuel had anointed David as the next king several years earlier, and news like that did not stay hidden in a tiny nation like Israel (1 Samuel 16:12-13). But Nabal's narcissism and arrogance made him send an insult to the future king of Israel. Nabal refused to deal fairly with David and closed his heart to any generosity.

In response to Nabal's surliness, David prepared his men for battle against Nabal's household (1 Samuel 25:12-13). In an act of grace and courage, Nabal's wife, Abigail, intervened on her husband's behalf. She sent a bounty of supplies to David's camp without Nabal's knowledge (verses 18-19). Then she went to David personally, humbling herself and pleading for mercy. Her quick thinking saved Nabal and his estate from David's retribution. Her gentle beauty and humble apologies calmed David, and he called off his planned retaliation (verse 35). David's dealings with Nabal were at an end, but the Lord was not finished with him. Vengeance belongs to the Lord (Romans 12:19).

When Abigail returned home, her husband was holding a feast and was drunk. When Nabal sobered up the next morning, Abigail told him what she had done to appease David. Upon hearing the news, Nabal had a stroke or heart attack and lay paralyzed. He lingered for ten days, and then the Bible says that "the Lord struck Nabal and he died" (1 Samuel 25:38). Rarely does the Bible use such terminology to indicate that a person's death was the result of a direct act of God. But in Nabal's case that was the truth. His ongoing, unrepentant wickedness, culminating in his open defiance of the Lord's anointed, was judged by God.

Nabal is an Old Testament example of the kind of person that Romans 1:28-32 describes:

filled with wickedness, greed, insolence, and arrogance. Drunken, slandering, and hostile to those outside his circle, Nabal is the epitome of what God hates. Nabal's fate should be a warning to us all. God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7). We reap what we sow. Galatians 6:8 says, "Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." Nabal lived to please himself but at the end of his life had nothing that would count for eternity. In the final analysis, it is only God's pleasure that matters. When we live to please the Lord, we benefit not only in this life but for all eternity (Matthew 6:19-20).