

## **Whose Providence?** **1 Samuel 25:1-26:25**

A young Christian woman prayed for a husband for several years. One day, her dream guy starts work in her company. He's handsome, courteous, considerate, funny – a real gentleman. But he's not a Christian. Two weeks later, he asks her out on a date. Should she interpret this as God's providence – as God's answer to her prayers? Should she go out with him and trust God to convert him by the time they get married – or by the time of their tenth wedding anniversary?

A middle-aged man's struggling to make ends meet. He lost his job when the company down-sized and can't seem to get another one. If he doesn't get more money soon, he'll have to take the kids out of the private school. As usual, he commits the situation to God in prayer in his daily quiet time. Then he turns on the TV and the first thing he hears is an ad for the lottery. Should he interpret this as God's answer to his prayers? Should he go out and buy a lottery ticket – or several lottery tickets?

The Bible tells us God is sovereign. He rules His world – and He rules everything in His world. Proverbs 16:33

*The lot is cast into the lap,*

*but its every decision is from the LORD.*

The number that turns up when you roll the dice is not outside God's control. So, if God controls all the circumstances of our lives, how do we read them to our advantage – how do we work out what God wants us to do?

Last week, we saw something of how it worked out in David's life in 1 Samuel 23 and 24. The following two

chapters continue to show us God at work in David's life – directing events and circumstances to bring about His promise to make David king.

### **David Acting Badly**

David and Saul go their separate ways at the end of chapter 24. David's ways take him and his band of men into the Desert of Maon. There, he comes into contact with a rich man by the name of Nabal. His name means *fool* – and none of the commentators can come up with a completely satisfactory explanation as to why his parents called him that. I think some people today call their newborn babies all sorts of strange things – but I can't imagine anyone calling their son *Idiot*.

- David Firth says the word could also mean *wine-skin* – but I'm not sure that's a great deal better.
- Bart suggests the name may come from another language and means *flame, sent, noble* or *skilled*.

Whatever the explanation, that's his name – and as we find out, it's a name he lived up to.

David must have been in the region a few months – long enough for Nabal's men to be able to verify that David and his men were honest. One of Nabal's servants tells us this in verse 15:

*Yet these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. Night and day they were a wall around us all the time we were herding our sheep near them.*

Now, it's sheep-shearing time – and that ended in a festive occasion. Nabal celebrates with a great feast for his workers. David sees it as a potential opportunity to get

some special food for his men. It can't have been easy finding sufficient sustenance for his band of outlaws while on the run in the wilderness regions of southern Judah. It wasn't as if they could stop and set up their own farms – plant a few crops and wait a couple of months for them to mature to harvest. David sends men to politely ask if Nabal could share some of his festive spirit.

- They ask on the basis of kinship.
- They ask on the basis of the unrequested help they provided Nabal's shepherds.

Some people who've watched too many Mafia movies think David's running some sort of protection racket. That's not what's happening here. David acted honestly towards Nabal and his servants. He merely asks Nabal to be generous on this festive occasion.

The narrator's already prepared us for Nabal's response. Back in verse 3, he told us Nabal was *surlly and mean in his dealings*. That's exactly what we see. Verse 10:

*Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?*

In other words: David's not important enough for me to bother about. Besides, rumour has it he's got himself on the wrong side of King Saul. Helping him would be an act of treason. And besides, why should I bother helping a bunch of misfits and criminals? It's very dismissive. He doesn't even bother checking out the story with his own shepherds. Surly and mean.

Thus, the tension builds. What will God's anointed king

do about this personal insult? David tells his men to put their swords on. Now, it may be he just planned on picking up a few choice sheep at Nabal's takeaway restaurant – sort of take his cut for the BBQ he planned even if Nabal wasn't prepared to be voluntarily generous. You could perhaps give David the benefit of the doubt at verse 13 – but not when you get down to verse 21:

*David had just said, "It's been useless – all my watching over this fellow's property in the desert so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!"*

Is that the proper response for the king of God's people? Does it show a desire to shepherd God's people in the right way? Is it the appropriate mixture of justice and compassion? Isn't David wanting to do to Nabal what Saul wants to do to him?

And think of the logic of what David's doing here.

- Chapter 24. Saul's been trying to kill him for years. God delivers Saul to David – defenceless and helpless. David says: No, principles come before providence. It's not right for me to kill Yahweh's anointed king.
- Chapter 25. Nabal insults David. It's a reasonably significant insult. He says David's not important enough for him to bother about. He doesn't even bother to check out David's story with his servants. David says: Aha, that's God's providential sign that I should take matters into my own hands. I'm to go up and execute judgment on this worthless fellow – and all his innocent household at the same time.

Providence comes before principles.

Something doesn't quite gel, does it? That's because David's not really being logical here.

So, what's God to do about David? God sends David a messenger – Nabal's wife, Abigail. Now, God doesn't do this by speaking to Abigail. Rather, He arranges for one of Nabal's servants to *break away from his master* (to use Nabal's words) and report events to Nabal's wife. It doesn't take her too long to assess the likely damage of her husband's insults and she quickly instigates a contingency plan to avert the coming disaster. She packs some of the food prepared for Nabal's feast, loads it on donkeys and sets off to intercept David.

When she arrives, she delivers God's message to David – not that God's given her a specific set of words He wants her to parrot off, but rather that God organises for her to use the intelligence He gave her to rightly assess the situation and warn David about the wrong he's about to do. It's a fairly lengthy speech and it's delivered in a spirit of submissive humility. The essence is in verse 26:

*Now since the LORD has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal.*

I'm not exactly sure what she meant by that last bit. Maybe she thinks Nabal's just a blustering old fool who's basically ineffective in any threat he poses to David – and she hopes all David's enemies may prove similarly ineffective. Maybe she anticipates God's intervention to bring Nabal to justice and to uphold the honour of the one she expects to be king.

She repeats the main message in verse 30:

*When the LORD has done for my master every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him leader over Israel, my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself.*

Abigail knows that David is God's servant.

- God will establish David's dynasty.
- It's God's battles David fights.
- God keeps David secure.

So, she reasons, it's important David maintain God's standards. It's important David not be guilty of wrongdoing. It's important David not let violence and power go to his head. He's to lead under God – and that means following God's directions. As Samuel warned Israel back in chapter 12, her kings were *not* to be like those of the other nations – both the king and Israel had to submit to God.

David, despite being at boiling-point, recognises God's hand in Abigail's intervention. Verse 32:

*Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak.*

This is one of the significant differences between David and Saul.

- God sends a prophet to confront Saul about his disobedience and Saul makes excuses and tries to

wriggle his way out of it. He doesn't take any steps to correct what he did wrong.

- God sends Abigail to confront David about his disobedience and he repents. He turns away from the wrong he's about to do.

In this incident, we again see the outworking of God's providence in the life of David. Question 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks:

What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

Answer: The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

Question 28 then asks:

What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence does still uphold all things?

Answer: That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

In this chapter, David's taught to trust God to take care of things. It's not a matter of trying to get all the perks of kingship for himself. That's the warning Samuel gave Israel back in chapter 8 – a king like the nations will take and take and take. Do something that upsets him and he'll use his power to take from you – even your very life.

That's what Saul's doing. Before Abigail arrives, David's doing the same thing. Israel's kings were to serve the nation, not themselves. David's taught, or reminded, that he's not to run ahead of God. He's not to take matters into his own hands. He's not to think he knows better than God how to be king. He's not to go against God's revealed will.

At this point, you may be thinking: So what? I'm not a king – and I'm never likely to be a king. What's it got to do with me? The lesson's exactly the same. We're to trust God and to act on the basis of His providence.

That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father ...

Our young Christian woman looking for a husband is to trust God's word about not being unequally yoked – even if she ends up on the shelf. Our middle-aged man is to trust God's provision and not succumb to the temptations of gambling. Principles come before providence. You're to discover God's will in His word and interpret your circumstances according to what He says – not the other way round. If we start with our own wisdom and attempt to read God's will from providential circumstances, we'll simply fall prey to our own evil, self-centred desires.

Two further comments. First, on this occasion, God sent Abigail along to turn David from his wrong intentions. That's an act of God's grace. God didn't have to do that. He'd already made His will clear in the law. That should have been sufficient for David. If God hadn't sent Abigail, that wouldn't excuse David. Later, in the incident with Bathsheba, there's no messenger sent to warn David

against the pursuit of his lust. God's made His will clear in His word. It's important for us to study it. Telling God we couldn't be bothered knowing what His will was isn't an acceptable excuse – it's just a demonstration that we really aren't interested in doing what He wants.

Secondly, on this occasion, God intervenes quite quickly. Nabal's dead within two weeks. God doesn't always do things that soon. That doesn't change the principles. You can't say:

OK God, I've waited a month. You haven't done Your bit – so now it's OK for me to take things into my own hands.

Principles remain principles no matter how long the delay – even if we never see the resolution in this life. Still we're to trust God – and we're to show that trust by acting on the basis of His word – not our own wisdom and not our own desire for vengeance.

### David Acting Rightly

In 1 Samuel 26, we find the Ziphites at it again. For some reason, they seem to have it in for David and they again approach Saul with David's location. Saul seems to have recovered from his bout of remorse in chapter 24 – when David spared his life and Saul said to David: *You are more righteous than I*. Nothing much has changed – Saul hasn't learnt anything. Saul heads south once again to attempt to exterminate David.

- No lesson learnt about doing the right thing.
- No lesson learnt about God protecting David.
- No lesson learnt about David being the next king.

This time, David takes the initiative. He heads off in search of Saul. Unlike Saul's efforts, David's scouts don't

have any trouble finding the exact location – but I guess Saul's not particularly trying to hide. David asks for a volunteer to enter Saul's camp with him.

Now pause for a moment to think about David's men. The narrator doesn't draw attention to them – but they're still there in the background. What would they be thinking at this point?

- At last, David's showing some initiative?
- Good, David's doing something positive about the Saul situation?
- David's had a rethink of his theology – this is where we get rid of Saul once for all?

I wonder how many of them were thinking along the same lines as David.

Abishai and David manage to sneak into Saul's camp. At least they had the good sense to do it at night. They get right up to where Saul's sleeping on the ground. At that point, they stop for a theological discussion. Abishai sprouts forth the same sort of providential theology as the rest of David's men in chapter 24. Verse 8:

*Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of my spear; I won't strike him twice.*

No change there – still the same approach David rejected last time. He hasn't learnt anything from the Nabal saga.

Some suggest this is a subtle variation on the previous theological argument. Maybe Abishai understands what David said last time. Maybe he's offering an alternative.

Look boss, I know you want to have squeaky clean hands when you come under all that media scrutiny after you're king. Here's a way you can stay clean and

still get rid of Saul. Just let me do the deed. People can blame me and you can still claim innocence. I'll only need the one shot. Isn't this why we came?

Whether it's the same old argument or a new variation, David rejects it. His theology hasn't changed. Verse 9:

*Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the LORD'S anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the LORD lives the LORD Himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD'S anointed.*

What is perhaps new – at least in the way it's expressed – is David's confidence that God, in His own time, will remove Saul. David's seen what God did with Nabal. He applies that lesson to Saul. He uses what Ralph Davis refers to as *imagination full of faith*. David comes up with several possibilities as to how God could eliminate Saul: strike him like Nabal; old age; death in battle. He probably had a few others up his sleeve as well. Even then, he wouldn't know all the possibilities. He knows he can't out-think God. He's not trying to tell God His job. He's not trying to put limits on God or box God into some corner of how He's got to act. He simply expresses his confidence that God will act – has a few possibilities in his own mind – but is happy for God to do it in whatever way He likes. David himself won't stoop to a wrong method to achieve a God-promised outcome.

At the end of verse 11, we find out the purpose of David's excursion into Saul's camp. He takes Saul's spear and water-jug from next to Saul's head. This time, there's no indication of remorse for these actions. We're not told why. I suspect David's motivation was different this time

– but that's only a guess on my part. It seems the whole exercise was designed to demonstrate to Saul once again that David's no threat to Saul's life – but that too is only a guess. What's not a guess is God's part in it. Verse 12:

*So David took the spear and water jug near Saul's head, and they left. No one saw or knew about it, nor did anyone wake up. They were all sleeping, because the LORD had put them into a deep sleep.*

God continues to protect David to bring about His promise.

David wisely puts some distance between himself and Saul's camp before he goes about waking them up and telling them what he's done. After telling off Abner and the rest of the army for not properly protecting the king, David then gets down to having a conversation with Saul along similar lines to chapter 24.

- David again declares his innocence of any wrong against Saul. He has a new emphasis on being driven from his share in the Lord's inheritance. The king should lead his people to enjoy the Lord's inheritance and to experience their relationship with God – not drive them away from it.
- Saul again expresses remorse. This time he admits straight out that he's sinned. He promises not to harm David and invites David to return.

Is it genuine repentance on Saul's part? We don't find out. In the short term, Saul goes home. David doesn't trust him sufficiently to go with him – and as events turn out, Saul doesn't have further opportunity to go chasing after David.

### Interpreting Providence

If you're like me, you probably have plenty of questions

after reading these stories. For example, was David right to take the huge risk of sneaking into Saul's camp? Was it an act of faith or was it putting God to the test? We're not told. The fact that it turned out all right doesn't tell us one way or the other. God, in His grace and mercy, sometimes rescues us from foolish choices we make. And sometimes He doesn't.

That's the danger – or one of the dangers – in trying to read God's will from circumstances alone. We control the way we read the circumstances – and we're biased by our own sinful, self-centred natures. Think of Nabal. He was rich. He has material blessings from God – but he's not godly and it doesn't stop him acting foolishly.

Sometimes people use cultural expectations to justify their own desires as being God's will – sometimes they use what they perceive to be providential circumstances; sometimes they use superstitious nonsense. It all boils down to the same thing in the long run: we find excuses to avoid doing what God's told us. God does rule this world. He does organise the circumstances of our lives – but He doesn't usually tell us whether it's an open door we're supposed to walk through or a test of our delight to do His will. He expects us to know His word and be able to work out the difference.

So it's important to know His word – to know what He says is right and wrong. Have you ever tried using the price test with God?

- There's a computer game you'd like to buy – but you're worried God may not want you to have it because you'll end up wasting too much time.
- Or there's a dress you'd like to buy – but you're

worried God may not want you to have it because it's really not modest.

- Or there's a car you'd like to buy – but you suspect your real motive has to do with ego.

Or maybe it's something else. You say to God: God, I'm not really sure about this and I don't want to dig too deep into my motives because I'm scared what I might find, but if You bring the price down to such-and-such I'll know You want me to buy it. If the price comes down, is God giving you the green light or is He testing your obedience to His word?

We need to get our principles right first – and we do that by prayerfully studying God's word. Yes, we can be confident of God's providential care in all circumstances. But our responsibility in that is to be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and always to place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father by paying careful attention to His word.

Losing face before his men.  
The oath.