

Psalm 15 is the counterpoint to the preceding psalm. Nabal the fool gives way to Abigail the beautiful, the wise, the courageous, and the unshaken. Taken together these two wisdom psalms offer a striking comparison. If 1 Samuel 25 is not the narrative back story, then Nabal and Abigail are at the very least illustrative respectively of self-destructive foolishness and life-fulfilling wisdom.

Scholars have classified Psalm 15 as a “liturgy at the gate.” The worshiper questions who may worship and the Levitical gate-keeper lists ten requirements for admittance into the sanctuary. The number ten recalls the ten commandments, God’s standard for holiness.<sup>1</sup> Although the “ten-fold structure of conditions” is suggestive of the Decalogue “there are no precise inner correspondences between the conditions of the Commandments.”<sup>2</sup> Peter Craigie points out the pedagogical value of the psalm: “Young persons were being instructed to tick off, as it were, on their ten fingers the moral conditions prerequisite to participation in worship.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Question*

*Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?*

*Who may live on your holy mountain?*

Psalm 15:1

The image of the sacred tent underscores Yahweh’s personal intimacy and our homecoming pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> The type points forward to the language of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the Word that was made flesh and *tabernacled* among us (John 1:14). He invited his followers to abide in him or make their home with him (John 15).

Psalm 14 concludes with a reference to Zion, the holy mountain of God. “Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!” (Ps 14:7). And this is precisely where the psalmist picks up the wisdom theme in Psalm 15. The question of access anticipates Zion instead of Sinai. The psalmist envisions genuine heartfelt worship that is filled with faith, not fear. In the Book of Hebrews we have a comparison between the two mountains, one of doom and the other of deliverance. The preacher/author of Hebrews declares with confidence, “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. . . .But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God . . . .” (Heb 12:18, 22).

Psalm 15 anticipates the message of Hebrews. The Law’s purpose has been fulfilled in Christ. The religion of Mount Sinai has been replaced categorically by something absolutely better.

“You have *not* come to a mountain that can be touched // and that is burning with fire; // and to darkness, // and to gloom, // and to storm; // and to a trumpet blast, // and to a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, Psalms, 386.

<sup>2</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 150.

<sup>3</sup> Craigie, Psalms, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 81.

even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear’” (Heb 12:18-21).

The contrast between the two descriptions could not be greater. All the identifying qualities of Mount Zion are relationally God-centered and culminate in Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, whose sprinkled, sacrificial blood is powerful to save.

“But you have come to Mount Zion, // and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, // and you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, // and to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, // and you have come to God, the Judge of all, // and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, // and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, // and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:22-24).

Instead of Sinai’s awful terror, darkness, and gloom, Zion is pulsating with awe-inspiring worship, joy, and love. There are “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” and all the righteous are the firstborn children of God, living by faith, known by name, and perfected by Jesus. In the parallel descriptions of Sinai and Zion, God is actively speaking and judging. At Sinai, the voice of God strikes terror and the people plead for relief. No one can bear the holy presence of God. But on Mount Zion, the saints are exhorted to hear the voice of God: “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks” (Heb 12:25).

The possibility of communion with Yahweh is grounded in covenantal love and the redemptive provision of divine grace. The fundamental question of access is put in every human heart by God himself (Ecc 3:11). It is asked in various ways throughout the Bible (Ps 24:3). The rich young ruler asked it of Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). The expert in the law tested Jesus with the question, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). When Peter’s Pentecost pilgrims heard the gospel they were cut to the heart and asked, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:27). The Philippian jailor asked it of Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30).

Behind this question, Theologian Patrick Reardon insists there is an “implied eschatology.” The person asking the question expects “to end up somewhere other than where he is now” and “life’s greatest tragedy” would be to “fail to abide in God’s tabernacle and to rest on His holy mountain.”<sup>5</sup> This is the deep human question that fools refuse to ask or they ask it with a cynical sneer. Nabal lived his life oblivious to the question of access. He despised those who concerned themselves with such matters. And the corollary to Nabal’s practical atheism was his refusal to acknowledge David’s goodness. Even though David and his men protected Nabal’s servants and herds (“Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them.” 1 Sam 25:16), Nabal lumped David in with the rebellious rift raft. Fools like Nabal project their own evil motives and ways on others and in the process incriminate themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 27.

*The Answer*

*The one whose walk is blameless,  
who does what is righteous,  
who speaks the truth from their heart;*

*“Walk straight,  
act right,  
tell the truth.”*

*whose tongue utters no slander,  
who does no wrong to a neighbor,  
and casts no slur on others;*

*“Don’t hurt your friend,  
don’t blame your neighbor  
despise the despicable.”*

*who despises a vile person  
but honors those who fear the Lord;  
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,  
and does not change their mind;*

*“Keep your word,  
even when it costs you,  
never take a bribe.” MSG*

*who lends money to the poor without interest;  
who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.*

Psalm 15:2-5b

The answer that follows proves that belief and obedience go hand in hand. The desire to abide in Yahweh’s sacred tent is a matter of faith, not works. The image of the tent is suggestive of the Incarnation (John 1:14). Mercy, not merit, makes living on Yahweh’s holy mountain a reality. This means that saving faith is always a working faith, and the life of faith embodies a way of living revealed by God and empowered by God’s grace. Psalm 14 is about human depravity – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Psalm 15 is about the gift of justification by faith through the grace of Christ. Psalm 14 describes those who despise God. Psalm 15 describes those who desire God. Psalm 15 is not a ten point standard of perfection. It is a profile of heart righteous faithfulness.

Psalm 15 does not prescribe the means of grace; it describes the state of grace. When the redemptive power of God is manifest in a person’s life this is what her behavior looks like in the light of the gospel:

- 1) Her walk is blameless because she trusts in the Lord with all her heart and leans not on her own understanding (Prov 3:5-6);
- 2) Her actions are righteous because she seeks first Christ’s kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33);
- 3) Her speech is true and edifying because she speaks the truth in love (Eph 4:15);
- 4) She refuses to gossip or slander or deceive because she has rid herself “of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1 Pet 2:1);
- 5) She loves her neighbor as herself (Lev 19:18);
- 6) She refuses to bite and devour others (Gal 5:15);
- 7) She discerns the difference between good and evil and chooses the good every time. She despises the despicable and honors the honorable;
- 8) She always keeps her word, remains true to her promises, and clings to the word of God (Matt 6:37);

- 9) She helps those in need without humiliating or exploiting them. She refuses to use the poor for her own financial or social gain (James 2:5-8);
- 10) She refuses to accept a bribe and pervert the course of justice (Prov 17:23).

Who better to illustrate Psalm 14's foolishness than Nabal; and who better to illustrate Psalm 15's faithfulness than Abigail. The narrator introduces Abigail as "an intelligent and beautiful woman" (25:3), who uses her quick wit and applied wisdom to divert a disaster. Informed by one of the young shepherds of her husband's ugly tirade against David and his men, Abigail flew into action (see 1 Sam 25 MSG). She put her staff to work assembling a portable feast of bread and wine, lamb and roasted grains, along with raisin and fig cakes. She sent the food on ahead as an impressive good will gesture and then she followed behind on a donkey. Abigail met David and four hundred of his armed men as they raced down the ravine heading for revenge. Moments before David had vowed to destroy Nabal, "May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" The vow called down God's judgment on David if he did not fulfill his word ( 1Sam 3:17; 14:44; 20:13). The only thing that stood between David and a massacre was Abigail.

Abigail dismounted and "bowed down before David with her face to the ground." She began, "My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say." In her speech, Abigail reveals not only her intelligence but her deep spirituality. She gave David the only possible reasons that allowed a man of God and a man of his word to break his vow. She gave herself up in complete humility. She identified and named Nabal's wickedness. "He is just like his name – his name means Fool, and folly goes with him (1 Sam 25:25). Abigail reasoned with David showing him that personal vengeance was contrary to God's will for him. "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" (1 Sam 25:26). She framed Nabal's offensive behavior in the larger context of God's will for David's life. "Please forgive your servant's offense, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord's battles. Let no wrong-doing be found in you as long as you live" (1 Sam 25:28).

Nabal had scorned David's identity and condemned David's motives, but Abigail recognized David as the Lord's anointed and Saul's successor. She understood David's life and death struggle with Saul and she vindicated David's cause. "Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my master will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God." (1 Sam 25:29). These words must have been amazingly encouraging for David. An unknown woman, intelligent and beautiful, intervened in a crisis situation to affirm the justice of his cause in a way that was both compelling and comforting.

Abigail was not finished. By faith she pledged her loyalty to the Son of David. "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. And when the Lord has brought my master success,

remember your servant” (1 Sam 25:30-31). David commended her, accepted her offering and he worshiped Yahweh, saying, “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...Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request” (25:32-33,35). The story takes a surprising twist when Nabal suffers an apparent stroke and dies ten days later (1 Sam 25:37-38). His loss did not cause anyone grief and probably no one, including David, expected such sudden vindication. For his part, David didn’t waste any time inviting Abigail to be his wife.

### *The Promise*

*Whoever does these things will never be shaken.*

Psalm 5:5c

This short five verse “liturgy at the gate” moves from admissions into worship to full assurance of the faithful’s final destiny. The last word of the sentence in the original Hebrew text reads “he shall not be moved, *ever*.”<sup>6</sup> The promise of daily worship carries an everlasting guarantee. Those who live this way by the grace of God will not be shaken. The theme resounds through the Bible. Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount by promising that “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matt 5:24).

The prophet Haggai describes the final judgment as a violent shake down (Hag 2:6) and the preacher in Hebrews develops this theme. Haggai’s prophecy of the coming judgment and the violent shaking of the cosmos was not meant to shake the confidence of those who have come to Mount Zion, who belong to the church of the firstborn, and who are made righteous by Jesus the mediator of the new covenant. The preacher writes, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Heb 12:28-29).

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 83.