



The Wise Woman of Abel

HER CHARACTER: Rather than passively waiting for someone else to save her city, she had the wisdom and courage to act quickly and decisively.

HER SORROW: That her city, though faithful to the king, was besieged by his army because it had been infiltrated by a rebellious leader.

HER JOY: That she was able to successfully intercede for the town, thus averting disaster for many innocent people.

KEY SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 20:14–22

Monday

HER STORY

*T*eddy Roosevelt once said that “nine-tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time.” After the dust settles, the storm clears, the action stops, it’s often too late for wisdom to work its marvels.

Many women in Scripture stand out for their wisdom. One woman, who lived in a town at Israel’s northern border, is identified solely as “a wise woman” (2 Samuel 20:16), acting quickly to save her city.

The sad stories of Bathsheba and Tamar highlighted the decline of David’s household. Eventually, Absalom, David’s third son, rebelled and was killed in a battle for the throne. In the midst of this political instability, a rabble-rouser by the name of Sheba, from the tribe of Benjamin (Saul’s tribe), attempted still another revolt. But Joab, the commander of David’s army, chased Sheba all the way to Abel Beth Maacah, in the north.

Joab had constructed siege ramps to assault the walls of Abel and squelch the rebellion. It was evident that the entire city would be destroyed unless someone acted quickly to preserve the peace.

Suddenly, a woman stood on the walls of Abel and shouted: "Listen! Listen! Tell Joab to come here so I can speak to him."

"We are the peaceful and faithful in Israel," she cried out. "You are trying to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel. Why do you want to swallow up the LORD's inheritance?" she challenged Joab.

"Far be it from me to swallow up or destroy!" he replied. "A man named Sheba son of Bicri, from the hill country of Ephraim, has lifted up his hand against the king, against David. Hand over this one man, and I'll withdraw from the city."

"His head will be thrown to you from the wall," she shouted back.

The woman turned to her fellow citizens, urging them to act. In just moments, a man's head came careening over the wall. Disaster was averted.

The men in this story appear to behave only in conventional terms: mobilize the army, build a siege ramp, violently smash the city walls, squelch the rebellion. But the woman looked for another solution. Gruesome as it was, it kept the peace and spared lives on both sides. Through her intercession on behalf of her people, innocent lives on both sides of the city walls were spared.

SIEGE

*W*hen Joab's men gathered outside of Abel Beth Maacah, a wise woman braved the warriors gathered outside and bargained with Joab for the life of Abel's inhabitants. No doubt she and others like her were part of the reason that Abel was known as "a city that is a mother in Israel" (2 Samuel 20:19), a place to go for answers to life's difficult questions. Its inhabitants must have been shrewd as well as wise to gain such notoriety.

War was a regular feature of life for the Israelites, so much so that freedom from war gained special notice in Scripture (Joshua 11:23; 14:15; 2 Chronicles 14:6–7). Battles between opposing armies were often waged in valleys or other wide-open spaces. Inhabitants of embattled areas would flee to the nearest walled and fortified city. In order to gain entrance and control of such a city, armies would gather outside the city walls and prevent anyone from going in or going out. When water and food became scarce or ran out altogether, the city's inhabitants would be forced to surrender.

When a city surrendered, its populace could look forward to one of two consequences: death or slavery. Often the deprivation and horror of a siege were preferable to surrender and its results. Depending on how well the city was prepared, a siege could last anywhere from days to weeks to months. An army of Egypt besieged the Philistine city of Ashdod for an incredible twenty-nine years.

Occupants of fortified cities spent much time in preparation for sieges. Strengthening the walls, gathering and storing extra food, and figuring out a way to gather and store large amounts of water required time and expertise. Some cities built long underground tunnels to allow water to flow freely into the city. Builders of these tunnels took care to disguise the water's source, for armies could then easily cut it off or use it to gain entrance into the city. Sometimes huge cisterns were dug within the city walls to catch and store rain water.

The attacking army outside a city's walls would move vast amounts of earth to build ramps to the upper parts of the city wall. From these ramps they would then use battering rams to attempt to break down the wall in that area, all the while defending themselves against the arrows and rocks and darts of the city's inhabitants. Joab's army built such a ramp and battered the wall of Abel in order to capture it and the rebel Sheba, who had taken refuge within. But rather than throwing down arrows or rocks, the wise woman of Abel shouted words of conciliation, and in so doing, preserved innocent lives.

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read 2 Samuel 20:14–22.

1. What do you think it was like for mothers with small children in Abel when Joab's army surrounded it?
2. Why do you suppose a "wise woman," rather than one of the leading men of the city, called out to Joab? What does this say about her?
3. What do Joab's terse words in verse 17 tell you about his reaction to this woman?
4. What do you think about what the town of Abel did to Sheba? Was the bargain they struck with Joab a good one? Why or why not?
5. The facts of this story are brutal and disturbing, but the facts of life for many today are just as brutal. War, abuse, poverty, illness, or death can besiege families or towns. How can you be a wise woman in your corner of the world?

*T*he wise woman of Abel saw a need for immediate action, and she acted. She recognized that this was not a time to passively wait for someone else to take the reins of leadership, not a time for quibbling or wavering, just a time to do what needed to be done. Through this woman, God saved the innocent inhabitants of her city. There are times when quick action is required of us as well. We may hesitate, we may wish to go another way, we may dodge and shuffle, but in the end we must act. When we're living in obedience and close relationship with God, we can trust that we don't go alone. God is there, giving us the help and assurance we require.

Promises in Scripture

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.

—JOSHUA 1:8–9

*Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.*

—ISAIAH 1:16–17

Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

—MATTHEW 21:1–3

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

*If you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom,
and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

—PROVERBS 2:3–6

- REFLECT ON:** 2 Samuel 20:16–20.
- PRAISE GOD:** For his wisdom, which far surpasses anything we might imagine.
- OFFER THANKS:** That true wisdom has nothing to do with intellectual ability but everything to do with humble dependence on God.
- CONFESS:** Any laziness that keeps you from searching out God's wisdom for your own life.
- ASK GOD:** To help you treasure his wisdom so that you are willing to actively seek it.

Lift Your Heart

*W*isdom has nothing to do with how many “gray cells” you possess. You can be smart as a whip but still full of foolishness. Take a few moments to reflect on this condensed and paraphrased passage from the book of Proverbs (3:13–18): “Blessed is the woman who has found wisdom. She has found something more precious than gold. None of her desires can compare with wisdom. For wisdom brings life, wealth, honor, and peace. Wisdom is a tree of life to be gladly embraced.”

Here are a few vital suggestions for cultivating wisdom in your life:

- Pray for it, remembering it is a gift from God.

- Read and meditate regularly on Scripture.
- Surround yourself with wise friends—listen and learn from them. (Consider meeting regularly with a spiritual director.)
- Make quick obedience a hallmark of your spiritual life; it leads to wisdom.

Lord, you are the source of the wisdom that brings life, wealth, honor, and peace. May wisdom be like a growing tree in my life, bearing abundant fruit for your kingdom.