

“Dealing with Conflict and Living to Tell About it” (Genesis 21:22-34)

In the last few years, there have been many “strange but true” stories about people who get into deadly conflicts over crazy things. In Orlando, a 48-year-old man was shot to death by his wife after a fight over the satellite TV controls. In California, a man was stabbed to death by his girlfriend because he brought home a McDonalds ham, egg, and cheese bagel instead of the two Egg McMuffins that she’d asked for. (Husbands, let that be a lesson to all of you... get it right!) In Dallas, a 37-year-old man was beaten to death by his roommate after a fight over the thermostat setting in their house. In Maryland, a 15-year-old boy has been charged in the shooting death of a man who was playing reggae music on his car stereo. Apparently, the boy really hates reggae music.¹

Although these are *extreme* cases and responses, we can all acknowledge it can be difficult maintaining positive relationships with others. As Christians we will have times of conflict; sometimes with a neighbor who seems unbearable, sometimes with an employer, customer, or government official who seems overly demanding or unfair, sometimes with a relative, or even a fellow Christian. The answer to handling these types of problems is not revenge, hostility, denial, or avoidance of the problem. The Bible tells us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Rom 12:18; cf. Heb 12:14). So as God’s people our goal should be to build and preserve our relationships. This is precisely what Abraham does in Genesis 21:22-34.² In these verses, we discover three principles that will enable us to deal with conflict and live to tell about it.³

1. Agree to live in peace (21:22-24). Our story begins in 21:22-24 with these words: “**Now it came about at that time⁴ that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham,⁵ saying, ‘God is with you in all that you do; now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned.’ Abraham said, ‘I swear it.’**” When we last saw Abimelech, Abraham prayed that his wives and slave girls could have children again (20:17-18).⁶ This time Abimelech brought his enforcer “**Phicol**”⁷ along and wants to sign a peace treaty with Abraham. King Abimelech proposes to enter into a treaty because he realizes that God’s hand is upon Abraham.⁸ In fact, he says to Abraham, “**God is with you in all that you do.**” In other words, Abraham enjoyed special, divine provision and protection. Now please understand that Abraham was far from perfect. He had his faults and hypocrisy. He committed his fair share of sins. Yet, Abimelech knew that God was with Abraham.⁹ As a result, he wanted to have a treaty with Abraham in order to protect himself and his people from being on the wrong side of his God.

Do people recognize that God is with you in everything you do (cf. Acts 4:13)? Is there something about your presence in your neighborhood or workplace that causes others to sit up and take notice? Let’s face it; we’re all hypocrites and sinners—every last one of us! We can wholeheartedly agree with the accusation that the church is made up of hypocrites. The issue is: In spite of your hypocrisy and sin is God still revealing His grace in and through you to an onlooking world?¹⁰

The good news for Abraham is that he failed in the past with King Abimelech (20:1-18), yet God now gives him another chance. This is sweet redemption! Believer, even if you have failed God in the past, God can raise you up in the present. Yesterday, you may have been a disgrace but today you can be a display of God’s glorious grace. Don’t give up on your failed testimony. Don’t count yourself out! God wants to use you today. He wants to give you an opportunity to redeem yourself.

Although Abimelech was an unbeliever, God worked in his life so that he was willing to make peace with Abraham.¹¹ As a result, Abraham was able to fulfill God’s original promise of being a blessing (12:2-3). It is possible to make peace with your enemies but it isn’t easy and it won’t happen overnight.¹²

But before we move on, I must pose a question: How would you feel if a king and his prime minister flattered you by acknowledging that God was with you in a very special way and then made you promise that you wouldn't lie anymore? Whew! Abimelech respected Abraham's God but he didn't trust Abraham. And who can blame him? After all, Abraham had already been exposed as a liar and Abimelech had nearly lost his life because of Abraham's deception (20:3). By putting Abraham on oath Abimelech sought to remedy the problem of deception.

It is amazing how many conflicts are caused or magnified by simple dishonesty.¹³ In Ephesians 4:25, we are told to lay aside falsehood and speak the truth to our neighbor. The context of this passage deals with unity; so it again is showing us how dishonesty spoils positive relationships. Abimelech could never have a positive relationship with Abraham until he was sure he could trust him. This could only happen if Abraham was honest from this point forward.

Can people depend on your words and promises? If not, what good are you? A promise is only as good as the promise-giver. As a result, there are few promises in life that you can unreservedly rely on. Yet, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) and not say anything that will grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30). This is an example of what it means to live in peace.

Another example is exhibited by Abimelech. The pagan King Abimelech made the first move—he demonstrated humility. Someone has to take the first step. Think about the strained relationships in your own life. Someone has to make the first move. Will you be the one to pick up the phone? Will you take the time to write a letter? Will you stop making excuses? Jesus made the first move when he “humbled Himself” by leaving heaven to be born as a tiny baby (Phil 2:5-11). He showed us what it means to take the initiative to heal a broken relationship.

As long as you sit where you are things will never change. But you say, “It's not my fault.” Maybe it's not but Jesus said, “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matt 5:23-24). Someone has to make the first move. Why not you? Is there someone in your life you really don't want to see right now? That's probably the first person you need to talk to.

Abimelech also displayed courage. Peacemaking takes courage because you never know how the other person is going to respond. There aren't any guarantees. Sometimes your best efforts will be rejected. In our case, Abimelech didn't know how Abraham would respond. If he got angry, it might lead to war. The same is true for you. If you make that phone call, or if you go see your boss, or if you write a letter to your mother, you're taking a big chance. The other person might not understand, or they might take it as a sign of weakness, or they may try to twist your motives. Peacemaking is risky business. That's why so few people try to do it. And that's why it often fails. But if you have a broken relationship in your life, it's not going to get better by itself. If you do nothing, things will only get worse.

Do you want harmony in your relationships? Make a commitment today to seek peace as far as it depends on you (Rom 12:18) and be upright in your speech.

2. Restore peace when it has been disrupted (21:25-30). In 21:25-27, Moses writes, “**But Abraham complained¹⁴ to Abimelech because of the well of water¹⁵ which the servants of Abimelech had seized. And Abimelech said, ‘I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor did I hear of it until today.’ Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant.**” In contrast to Abraham's previous fear of Abimelech, we now see him boldly standing up to this powerful king. His walk with God has matured him and given him a greater fear of God. This should be true for every follower of Christ. Do you fear God more than man?

In this section, Abraham brings up the matter of the well that Abimelech's servants had seized from him. They made peace and immediately Abraham starts complaining. But he's perfectly justified because if he lets that issue fester, pretty soon the whole peace treaty will go up in smoke. So he has to mention it even though it might have been easier to overlook it. If you and I want to live in peace with others, honesty is not the best policy, it is the only policy.

Yet, many of us shy away from this kind of open confrontation. We'd rather just look the other way when problems come. But I learned years ago that the first price you pay is always the cheapest. When you don't deal with relational problems, the price for solving those problems always goes up. It never goes down. The truth may hurt but it is always more satisfying in the end. Without honesty in relationships, peace is impossible.

Abraham and Abimelech also show great patience with one another. Peacemaking requires patience because attitudes don't change overnight. You can't overcome years of hostility and mistrust over one quick lunch at Denny's. In this case, both Abimelech and Abraham had to learn to live together despite their differences in background and religion.

Would you like a definition of patience? Here's one that works for me. Patience is the willingness to wait for God to solve my problems. So many times we get frustrated with other people because they aren't changing fast enough to suit us. Parents get angry at their children, husbands at wives and wives at husbands, adult children get frustrated with their elderly parents, workers with their bosses, bosses with their employees, students with their teachers, friends with friends, relatives with relatives, and church members get frustrated with each other all the time.

We throw up our hands and say, "What's wrong with those people?" That's the wrong question because it focuses all the attention on others when we really ought to throw the spotlight on our own sinful impatience. What we ought to ask is, "Am I willing to wait for God to solve my problems?" Proverbs 21:1 reminds us that the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. If that's true, and if we have committed the people who frustrate us to the Lord, then we can simply sit back and wait for God to do His work. Sooner or later, even the hardest heart must bend to His will.¹⁶

In 21:28-30, Moses writes, "**Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?' He said, 'You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand so that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well.'**" In their last conflict, it was Abimelech that modeled generosity (20:14-16). Here, Abraham returns the favor in a small way. It is his way of saying, "I want to do my part to restore peace. I want to dwell in harmony." This little gesture made a big difference.

This is true for you as well. Small gestures can have big results.

3. Use your peaceful, prosperous life to serve God (21:31-34). Our story concludes with these words: "**Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because there the two of them took an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, arose and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days.**" "**Beersheba**" means both "well of seven" and "well of the oath." Beersheba, one of the more important sites throughout Old Testament times, became Abraham's possession. So he planted a tree there. By planting a tree Abraham indicated his determination to stay in that region. Tamarisk trees were long-lived and evergreen. The tree was meant to be a lasting landmark to God's provision and a focal point of Abraham's worship. It served as an appropriate symbol of the enduring grace of the faithful God.

After planting the tree, Abraham **“called on the name of the Lord.”**¹⁷ This is a phrase that suggests worship and public proclamation (cf. 4:26). In honor of the Lord, Abraham called on **“the Everlasting God.”** The Hebrew phrase *El Olam* is only used here (21:33).¹⁸ This name stresses God’s everlasting nature. God’s promises and covenant are everlasting because God Himself is eternal. Abraham has now found God to be what He claimed earlier to be, a shield to him (cf. 21:22; 15:1). He, further, seems to be growing in his conception of God; He is now the Everlasting God. Even through this time of conflict in his family and among his neighbors, Abraham kept a real, live walk with God. Conflict can drive us away from God, but we should allow it to push us closer to Him.

The last three verses tell of the positive results of this peace treaty:

1. Abimelech and his men returned home (21:32).
2. Abraham worshipped God in Beersheba (21:33).
3. Abraham lived in peace for a long time (21:34).

Abraham now owned a small part of the land God had promised him. By granting Abraham rights to a well, Abimelech had made it possible for Abraham to live there permanently and had acknowledged his legal right, at least to water. In other words, after so many delays the promises of land and descendants at last seem on their way to fulfillment.

God encourages us when we are moving in the direction of inheriting the promises. We ought to take notice when small things happen to us that take a step towards inheriting what we know to be God’s will for our lives. God is still alive. He still gives us affirmations of His will.¹⁹

So why has the narrator included the story of this treaty? Gradually, Abraham is establishing roots in the land—digging wells and planting trees. Additionally, as relationships are established with the peoples in the land, the blessing is taking root (12:2-3). Finally, the relationship with God is taking root as land and family becomes established. Abraham has everything going for him: his wife, his promised son, his land, his servants, his wealth, and peace with all his neighbors. Life is grand! In one sense this sets up a false sense of security (literally), as the narrator gets ready to drop the bombshell of Genesis 22. Just as the elements of the covenant are beginning to look routine, a major disruption is about to occur.²⁰ God is doing a work to prepare Abraham. The grinding and polishing of old Abraham had been going on for years. The frictions of adversity had been polishing his soul. Thus, Abraham’s soul was becoming luminous and it is going to dazzle us with divine light!²¹

How can we boil down this unusual story? First, remember that conflict is a good thing. It makes us better believers. Second, remember that both conflict and prosperity typically prepare us for further challenges.

Players gathering for the first day of basketball practice at UCLA were full of anticipation. They wondered how their coach, John Wooden, would set the tone for the long season to come. They didn’t have to wait long. Veterans knew what was coming. But first-year players were no doubt perplexed by the initial lesson imparted by their Hall of Fame coach: He taught them how to put on a pair of socks. He did not teach this lesson only once, but before every game and practice. Why?

Wooden discovered many players didn’t properly smooth out wrinkles in the socks around their heels and little toes. If left uncorrected, these wrinkles could cause blisters that could hamper their performance at crucial times during games. Many players thought the practice odd and laughed about it then. Wooden knows some of them still laugh about it today. But the coach would not compromise on this basic fundamental principle: “I stuck to it. I believed in that, and I insisted on it.”

In our desire to grow as Christians, we can easily forget about the fundamentals of our faith. If we do, we run the risk of developing painful spiritual blisters that can hurt us as we run our race.²²

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Notes

¹ Mark Brouwer, “Building Positive Relationships” (Genesis 21:22-34): http://www.bridgewood.org/index.cfm?PAGE_ID=344&EXPAND=255.

² Kenneth O. Gangel, *Genesis: Holman Old Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 186.

³ The principles of this sermon have been revised from Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 387-390.

⁴ Waltke writes, “This scene occurs at the same time as the events of 21:1-21 but focuses on different characters and tensions. This second conflict with Abimelech creates a bracket around the Isaac birth narrative. Whereas the first conflict (20:1-18), concerned jeopardy of the seed, the second conflict (21:22-34) concerns jeopardy of the land (i.e., well rights).” Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 298.

⁵ Waltke observes, “Each of the names of the principal characters, Abraham and Abimelech, occurs exactly seven times.” Waltke, *Genesis*, 298.

⁶ Sailhamer writes, “The reoccurrence of Abimelech in v. 22, though something of a surprise in the narrative, shows that the setting of these narratives had not changed and that Abraham was still living with the Philistines. This judgment is confirmed at the conclusion of the narrative where it explicitly says that Abraham continued to sojourn with the Philistines ‘for a long time’ (v. 34). The reader is forced to ask why his attention is constantly being drawn to the fact that Abraham was dwelling with the Philistines during this time. Perhaps it was to present a picture of Abraham as someone who had yet to experience the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Without the continuing accounts of Abraham’s dealings with Abimelech, the other events in these narratives might easily have been read within the context of the Promised Land. Thus what we are forced to see is a picture of Abraham who did not live out all his days in the Land of Promise but spent many of his days in exile. Even Isaac, the son of the promise, was not born in the Land of Promise. He was, rather, born in exile and had to sojourn there with his father who ‘wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another’ (Ps 105:13). The intention of the narrative seems very close to that which the writer of the Book of Hebrews saw in these narratives. In Hebrews 11:8-13, where it is recalled that though Abraham had left his father’s land and had come to the Land of Promise, he lived there ‘like a stranger in a foreign country...they were aliens and strangers on earth.’” John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

⁷ “Phicol” seems to have been a title rather than a proper name (see Gen 26:26).

⁸ Abraham had now set the “God is with you” standard that would also become that of Isaac (26:28), Jacob (30:27), and Joseph (39:3). R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 296.

⁹ Arnold writes, “This powerful king’s respect for Abraham proves that God’s promises are gradually taking hold. Abraham has become a formidable presence in the area.” Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 106.

¹⁰ Peaceful, interpersonal relationships with those who acknowledge God enable the believer to proclaim his or her faith freely.

¹¹ An interesting verse appears in Prov 16:7: “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

¹² Ray Pritchard, “How to Make Peace with Your Enemies” (Genesis 21:22-34): <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=314>

¹³ This is a common theme in Genesis (e.g., Jacob’s dishonesty led to conflict; Esau and Laban’s dishonesty led to conflict with Jacob).

¹⁴ The Hebrew verb *yakach* (“complained”) implies that Abraham had to complain several times.

¹⁵ Wells were extremely important in the life of semi-nomads like Abraham.

¹⁶ Pritchard, “How to Make Peace with Your Enemies.”

¹⁷ Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 389.

¹⁸ Eaton remarks, “There are five compound names for God in the book of Genesis with the word *El* in them, *El Shaddai*, *El Elyon*, *El Olam*, *El Ro’i*, *El Bethel*. Each of these names arose in the context of some event which gave the person concerned a fresh glimpse of God.” Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 108-109.

¹⁹ Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 108.

²⁰ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 502.

²¹ Hughes, *Genesis*, 296.

²² Preaching Today Citation: Lee Dean, Griffith, Indiana; source: espn.go.com/page2/s/questions/wooden.