

Text: Gen. 21:9-34

Title: "Facing Conflicts with the Everlasting God"

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Introduction: There is a lot of talk in today's world about "conflict resolution." It is a term that it used by those who believe that we could do away with armies and police departments if we only learned a few simple principles about imagining a world of peace.

The folks at Peacelearningcenter.org teach children four easy steps to a conflict-free existence: stay cool; tell your point of view; explore their point of view; and problem solve. Now all this is great, but something tells us adults that this is not going to work very well when dealing with Al Quaeda or the street gangs of Los Angeles or Chicago.

We will never obliterate society's need for armies and police forces. That kind of peace will only happen when Christ comes, and even then it will need to be enforced with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15, "And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God").

The passage before us is about resolving conflicts, and it introduces us to Phicol, the commander of the army of Abimelech, but it never asks Phicol to disband his troops. Abraham had experienced the necessity of armed conflict in the past. As believers, we ought to support a strong national defense, the enforcement of domestic law and order, and an armed citizenry under the freedoms of the Second Amendment.

This passage does, however, give us some important principles for dealing with conflicts on a personal level as we seek to do God's will in our lives. We do not read about national

foreign policy or solving society's crime problem here, but we do read about what the testimony of believers ought to be like when they face conflict on a personal level. I think we see three areas of conflict faced by believers in this passage.

I. God can help us face conflicts in the home (vv. 9-14).

Illustration: Recent discoveries of molecular biology have given the scientists a new appreciation for the complexities and importance of the living cell. Evidently, each of our 1 trillion living cells is more complex than the space shuttle.

One of the underlying assumptions of Darwin's theory of evolution, of course, was that the living cell was what he called "the simplest structure" (*Origin of Species*, 138). But even in Darwin's day it was understood that cells are the basic building blocks of life, that all living things are made up of cells, and that cells come from other cells.

Application: Cells have all these characteristics in common with the family. Just as cells are the basic building blocks of biological life, so also is the family the basic building block of social life. The other two social institutions ordained by God, strong nations and strong churches, depend on the well-being of their basic building block, strong families.

In addition, just as it is cells that form other cells, so also do families form other families. Cells are complex entities designed by God with certain specifications for good health, and families are complex entities that are designed by God with certain specifications for good health. Facing the conflict of domestic trouble is one of the things a family needs to know how to do in order to remain a healthy home.

1. Realize that "kidding around" in the home can become persecution (v. 9, Gal. 4:29).

Application: The word that describes the offence of Ishmael here is the same root as the word translated *laugh* in v. 6. It is given a different form here in verse 9, which indicates that the laughing in this case was unrelenting. Kidding around can become persecution. What Moses calls kidding around here (see also 19:14), Paul calls persecuting (Gal. 4:29).

We need to realize that laughing can be used in a way that persecutes someone else. When we laugh at the expense of someone else, we need to do so sparingly, and we need to make sure that they are laughing too. Ishmael created conflict in his home because he did not know when kidding around was just not funny anymore.

2. Realize that the apparent cause of a conflict in the home is often not the root cause of that conflict (v. 10).

Application: The real problem in the family of Abraham was that he had one too many sons; he had treated a slave girl as though she were his wife; and he had obtained a son whom he now had to treat as though he were not his son (Sarah called Ishmael the son of this handmaid, not the son of Abraham; God agrees with Sarah calling Ishmael “the boy” and Hagar “your maid” [v. 12]).

God’s design for the believer’s home is just as detailed and significant as His design for the human cell. One man who is a believer marries for life one woman who is a believer; they remain faithful to one another and bear children together; he loves his wife, she submits to her husband, and the children obey. Trouble and heartache comes to the home when we decide that we are going to throw out some aspect of God’s design for a home. Our homes cannot be healthy this way any more than our cells can be. Our modifications are damaging.

3. Realize that healthy homes require acting on God’s directives instead of our emotions (vv. 11-14).

Application: God asked Abraham to do something that distressed him greatly, and He also asked him to not be distressed while doing it (v. 12). Obeying God can feel hard.

Abraham feared that God's directive would result in the needs of his family not being met, but God assured him that this was His will. Husbands do not always feel like loving their wives, wives do not always feel like honoring their husbands, children do not always feel like obeying, and single people do not always feel like patiently waiting on God's will, but all of these things are critical directives from the Lord for the healthiness of our homes. God helps us deal with conflict in the home by giving us these directives to follow with His help.

II. God can help us face financial pressure (vv. 15-21).

Illustration: Joelolsteen.com advertises a message series the popular preacher has entitled, "Experiencing God's Favor." The write up on the website says this about the series:

"When you learn to tap into God's favor, you will have a tremendous advantage. Doors will open for you that remain closed for others. You will receive preferential treatment that seems unusual to most people, but for those living in the favor of God, it is no less than you expect.

"We should live each day anticipating more of God's favor. 1 Peter 1:13 says, 'Gird up the loins of your mind and hope to the end for the divine favor that is coming.' [The untwisted rendering of this verse is actually: 'hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.'] In his new series, 'Experiencing God's Favor,' Joel Osteen shows you how to get your thinking in line with God's thinking and receive more of His favor than you ever imagined possible. This enlightening two-message set includes:

"Experiencing More of God's Favor

Speaking Favor Over Your Life.

“It only takes one touch of God’s favor to completely turn your situation around. Discover the key to turning adversity into victory, failure into success, and sickness into abundant good health as you unlock the power of God’s divine favor in your life.” [<http://bookstore.joelosteen.com/p-5602-experiencing-gods-favor.aspx>; 4/2/08.]

Application: God’s dealings Hagar her expose the shallowness of the prosperity preachers of our day. Note some lessons from Hagar’s example of dealing with financial pressure.

1. Financial pressure is often a part of God’s plan for his people (vv. 15-16).

Application: Financial pressure is no more a sign of God’s disfavor than is financial success a sign of God’s favor. Throughout history, there have been many rich people of whom God disapproved and many poor of whom He approved.

God can use times of financial pressure to make us more like Christ, who often never had a place to lay his head. Few were less wealthy than Jesus, and no one had more of God’s divine favor upon Him: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Hagar’s problem here had nothing to do with the fact that she had not yet purchased Joel Olstein’s DVDs. These were circumstances that God had brought into her life for His reasons, in spite of the fact that His favor was still on her and her son.

2. Financial pressure challenges us to trust the Lord rather than fear (vv. 17-18; 16:10).

Application: God expects us to remember His promises. Hagar had been in this situation before (16:10), and so have we. It is amazing how we forget these times of God’s faithfulness.

He taught us to pray for our daily bread because our heavenly Father knows how to give good gifts far better than earthly fathers do. We are far better than birds and lilies of the field, all of whom are provided for by God. The psalmist had never seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread. God promises to provide for our needs. That does not mean that we will never experience hunger or thirst. But it does mean that we should never experience fear when we do.

3. Resolving financial pressure requires opening our eyes to see God's blessings (vv. 19-21).

Illustration: "Sherlock Holmes: "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room."

Watson: "Frequently."

Holmes: "How often?"

Watson: "Well, some hundreds of times."

Holmes: "Then how many are there?"

Watson: "How many? I don't know."

Holmes: "Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed."

[From: "A Scandal in Bohemia" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Doubleday, 1927)]

Application: Hagar's problem was a lot like Mr. Watson's. She had seen but not observed. It was not that she lacked water; it was that she lacked the ability to see the water she had. We need to keep our heads up enough to see God's blessing when it comes. In the words of C. H. Spurgeon, "We need not so much that God should give us more benefits, as the ability to see what He has given." God can help us face financial pressure, and He has faithfully done so again and again.

III. God can help us face an inhospitable world (vv. 22-34).

Illustration: All of us as believers feel a sense of homelessness at times. That sense is perhaps best expressed in Albert Brumley's old country hymn: "I can't feel at home any more":

"This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue;
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

"They're all expecting me, and that's one thing I know,
My Savior pardoned me and now I onward go;
I know He'll take me thro' tho' I am weak and poor,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

"I have a loving Savior up in glory-land,
I don't expect to stop until I with Him stand,
He's waiting now for me in heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

" Just up in glory-land we'll live eternally,
The saints on every hand are shouting victory,
Their songs of sweetest praise drift back from heaven's shore,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

"O Lord, you know I have no friend like you,
If heaven's not my home, then Lord what will I do?
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

How must we homeless believers live in this world?

1. Let the world know that you desire to live peaceably with all men (vv. 22-32, 34). Rom. 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." The passage before us gives two specifics that are important to our testimony in this regard: (1) recognize that the world has a higher standard for those who know the Lord (vv. 22-24); (2) recognize that the

world will make mistakes that need correcting (vv. 25-32). God does not expect believers to be doormats in the world.

2. Let the world know that you desire to worship the Lord (v. 33). Abraham had a testimony among his neighbors that said that worshipping the Lord was important to him. Isaac probably had to miss a baseball game or two because his dad had the family worshipping the Lord under the tamarisk tree in Beersheba. Do your neighbors see worshipping the Lord as a consistent priority in your life, or do they see it as something that you just fit in when you can, when all the more important things are taken care of? We need to let the world know that worshipping the Lord, the God Everlasting, is a big priority in our lives.

Conclusion: Conflicts in the home, financial pressures, and life in an inhospitable world are nothing new for the believer. But like these patriarchs, may we grow in our understanding this morning that the Everlasting God can be trusted in every circumstance, every trial, and every need. Soon we will be home and our troubles will be behind us then. Will we have trusted His plan? Will we hear Him say, “Well done”?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

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