

## **Father Abraham Had Many Sons (And Daughters): Coming to Terms**

Dr. Tom Pace

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Genesis 31:43-55

*Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.” So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, “Gather stones,” and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he called it Galeed, and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.”*

*Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and see the pillar, which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor”—the God of their father— “judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country.*

*Early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home. Genesis 31:43-55*

*Let us pray. Gracious God open us up to whatever it is you have for us today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear and then open up our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

It was a number of weeks ago that the British Navy seized an Iranian tanker off of Gibraltar on its way to take oil to Syria. This was against the sanctions. Later the Iranians attacked and captured a tanker in the Strait of Hormuz. The Iranians shoot down an American drone, and then the U.S. downs an Iranian drone. Tit for tat. You can just see where it's going. It's not going in a good direction.

Friends, we live with conflict all around us. A good thing about it is that as a preacher I don't have to work very hard to find the examples to share with you. Whether it's the intractable problem of Palestine and Israel, or divisions within our country over all sorts of issues, or divisions in our city. The firefighters who are in conflict with city government, or a conflict within a denomination that is arguing over same-sex marriage and homosexuality. Or maybe there's conflict within a local church where we argue over maybe the color of the carpet. Really big and important things like that.

Conflict is around us. And at some point, we have to decide how we're going to deal with it. Now we as Christians are called to be people of peace. The prophets said that in the Messianic age when the Messiah comes that we will "beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks and study war no more."

When Jesus called his disciples apart, he took them off to a mountain and then gave the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "This is how we'll be different than the world. Our righteousness will exceed theirs, and we'll be peacemakers. Blessed are the peacemakers."

When he's coming down from the Mount of Olives on Palm Sunday, he gets half way down and there's a place where he catches a view of the city of Jerusalem. He stops and he weeps, and says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, would that you know the things that make for peace."

The Book of Romans tells us that we are to "do the things that make for peace."

I want to talk today about what those "things that make for peace" are.

I have to tell you that I think that we like to think about these conflicts in the world or in the church when the truth is that we can probably have a greater influence on making peace with the people who live in the same house with us. Or make peace with our neighbors. Or make peace with the person in the office who works down the hall who rubs you the wrong way all the time.

The conflict that really eats our lunch is the conflict that's closest to us. I confess that I think sometimes we get all worked up about the conflict in the world around us as a distraction from having to deal with the stuff that's closest to us. Sure, we are to be advocates for peace. We have a voice in the country so we should advocate for peace whenever we can and challenge our

leaders to do the things that make for peace. But right next to us we can do lots of things that make for peace in our own relationships.

The story we have today is full of conflict. Jacob has swindled his brother Esau out of his blessing and birthright. He runs away 600 miles north to Haran, and there he stays with his uncle Laban. He falls in love then Laban swindles him so that he'll work for him for 20 years. When I hear that part of the story, I have to think that Jacob had it coming to him. It seems like a "comeuppance" for him. If you're going to treat your brother that way, then you get treated that way. So what does he do then? He swindles his uncle back. He deceives him right back.

The thing about this story is that it is so realistic. It really is. The very core issues that drive us into conflict are so present here. There are no good guys here. We like to paint conflicts as "good guys" and "bad guys" but the truth is that everyone usually plays a part. Everyone has a part in the breakdown of the family system of the conflict that's there. We all have to own our part.

So, there's fear. When Laban chases after Jacob and catches him, he says, "Why did you run away? Why did you take my daughters? You didn't even let me kiss my grandkids goodbye!" And Jacob says, "Because I was afraid."

How often is fear a part of this? We're afraid of losing what we've got. We're afraid of losing our style of life. We're afraid of all sorts of things and that drives our decision making and pushes us into conflict.

Or, just plain self interest in greed. Everybody wanted what they wanted, and they were going to do anything to get what they wanted. The name "Jacob" means "grabber." Did you ever think maybe you should be named "grabber"? I think I should sometimes. I want what I want, and I want it now! All of these things resonate so much with me because that's how most conflict is.

And here's the awesome part. It's that our God comes right down into the midst of it. Our God just comes right down into the midst of it. You think that we're supposed to be peacemakers and people of peace and you think maybe God would say, "You guys just figure out how to get along down there and then I'll show up. Until you do that, I'm just going to stay up here. You guys are just a mess!" But that's not what God does. God doesn't abandon us in the midst of it. God comes to show us the things that make for peace.

I want to talk then about a recipe. A recipe for progress, to move us down the road toward peace. I think what's so awesome is that we have such a pragmatic God in this story, saying, "This is how we're going to do this..."

Three things I want you to see and I know there are others in terms of a recipe for peace, but in this story three things jumped out at me.

The first is that there has to be some truth telling. You have to deal with the reality of what's going on. Laban comes after him and just says, "Why did you run away? You stole my gods. You did all these things..." And Jacob says, "Well, I was afraid. You had swindled me, you had cheated me." The Scripture literally says that Jacob "upbraided" Laban. He let him have it.

At some point you have to get it all out on the table. You can't ignore the elephants in the room. You've got to get it all out on the table. And what's more. If you really want to make progress toward peace you have to come to some semblance of a mutual understanding of the reality of the real situation.

One of my friends is an expert in first and second century Judaism. He was telling me about how there were two rabbinic schools in early Judaism. One is called Shammai and one is called Hillel. The Shammai school was the narrower of the two, supporting a stricter interpretation, and the Hillel school was more fluid and more open. They would often get into debates and challenge one another.

Over time the Shammai school faded away, but the Hillel school remained. There's been a lot of conversation about why that happened, and in fact, there are Hillel rabbis today. Here's one of the reasons why they believe that happened. It was that the Hillel rabbis were required – by Hillel himself – that in any argument or debate before they could state their case, they had to be able to state the case of the Shammai rabbi to the satisfaction of the Shammai's rabbi before they could state their own case. Before they could say, "Here's what I think," they had to be able to say, "Let me make sure I understand what you think." Stephen Covey used to talk about it as "seek first to understand before and only then be understood."

At some point we have to deal in the truth and our perceptions of truth are different. So build an understanding where each of the other lives.

Here's the second thing. This particular verse, and it runs all the way through here, verse 52: "This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm."

Boundaries. At some point you have to come to terms, you have to come to a deal. You have to say, “Here’s how it’s going to be. Let’s set some boundaries. You stay on that side and I’ll stay on this side.” I always think about riding with my brother in the back of the station wagon where you draw a line between you. You say, “You stay on your side of the line and I’ll stay on my side of the line.”

Setting boundaries is far more than just a piece of property. Setting boundaries has to do with what you’re responsible for and what you have to take responsibility for. You’re responsible for that stuff, and I’m responsible for this stuff. You’re responsible for your life but you’re not responsible for mine. And I’m responsible for my life but I’m not in charge of yours.

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, two Christian psychologists, wrote a great book called *Boundaries*. It became a New York Times best seller and I recommend it to anybody. Their basic premise is that so many of our conflicts are rooted in unclear boundaries, not knowing what I’m responsible for. Let me read you a piece from the book: “Think how confusing it would be if someone told you to guard this property diligently and I will hold you responsible for what happens here, then did not tell you the boundaries of the property. This would be not only confusing but also potentially dangerous.

“This is exactly what happens to us emotionally and spiritually, however. God designed a world where we all live within ourselves, that is, we inhabit our own souls, and we are responsible for the things that make up *us*. We have to deal with what is in our soul, and boundaries help us to define what that is. If we are not shown the parameters or taught wrong parameters, we are in for so much pain.”

The two authors talk about how they work with families with children and how often the parents have decided to take on the problems that are really those of the children. “Look, you need to get your homework done. You need to get your homework done!” But the truth is that it’s the child’s problem, it’s not yours to make sure their homework is done. It’s the child’s responsibility to do their homework.

When we decide we’re going to take on that problem ourselves to make sure that it happens, then why would they need to take it on themselves? If you’re going to make sure your child gets into college, why do they need to fill out the applications. You’ve got it well in hand.

Boundaries.

At some point as we deal with these conflicts we have to come to terms. It's funny, after the 9:45 service a lady came out and she said, "Well, I'm going home to have a truth-telling with my daughter and we're going to come to a deal!" I suspect many of you have said to a spouse, or a parent, or to a child, "Okay, here's the deal." And then you outline what each of you is responsible for. At some point you have to come to some boundaries.

Here's the last thing that I see here. It's this verse: "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine."

Now that's not a good way to start. Then it goes on: "But what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I..."

At some point you have to release some things. "I can't do anything about this, I'm going to let it go. I'm going to release this and keep it from keeping us stuck here."

We are all so tight and hold on to so much inside us. So much that we get tighter and tighter and refuse to let go of things. So of course we make no progress.

A number of years ago the Arbinger Institute came out with a book called *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*. Many of you might have done it at your workplace. I know that a number of companies have used it as they dealt with things at work. The Arbinger Institute also wrote a great book called *Leadership and Self Deception: Getting out of the Box*.

*The Anatomy of Peace* is based on this story of two men, an Arab and a Jew, and each of them had lost their fathers at the hands of the ethnic cousins of the other, so they carried all this pain. But they came together and created a program sort of for difficult children and their parents. Sort of a behavior modification for the parents.

They took the skills they learned to try and work through this national issue, this issue that grew out of ethnic conflict, and they began to apply it to families and work places and other things. It's a great story and I wanted to read you just one piece of it. "The more sure I am that I am right, the more likely I will actually be mistaken. My need to be right makes it more likely that I will be wrong. Likewise, the more sure I am that I am mistreated, the more likely I am to miss ways in which I am mistreating others myself."

What he's saying is that as we stay so sure and so tight and so afraid to be wrong, sure that I'm right I begin to just push away any evidence, any data, that I might be wrong. So I begin to operate not with correct data but just with this little circle that I have. At some point we have to open up and say, "You know, I could be wrong. I'm going to let it go."

Now let me get to the close. The result of a covenant – when we get to the place where we tell the truth and put it on the table. We come to some terms, to a deal, and then we let go. The result of that covenant is that we're able to move on.

Here's what I want you to understand. The result of the covenant is not necessarily that things are made right. The result of the covenant is not necessarily that you fixed all the problems, or that you've paid back for all of your misdeeds. At some point you come to a place where you say, "All right, here's the deal. We've come to terms," and that allows them to move on.

Listen to the verse: "Early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home." Now is that reconciliation? They never see each other again. I don't know that it's reconciliation. But they're able to move on.

When we work with families that are going through a divorce, we're praying with them and trying to help them move forward. And what happens is that there's all this anger and bitterness and strife and bargaining and negotiating. They have lawyers and mediators and all those sorts of things. They finally they come to a place where they reach a deal. And it may not be that everybody thinks the deal is just right, but what the deal allows them to do is to move on, move forward with God's purposes for their life. To put that brokenness behind them and move forward toward the Promised Land. This journey from Haran to Canaan is a journey of God's promises for us.

If we're going to move forward to what God's future is to be, at some point we have to take that brokenness and just put it here, stop it here, reach a deal, and then move on. Let it go and move on forward. This is the nitty-gritty kinds of things that God's right in the midst of. These are the things that make for peace.

So I don't know where there's conflict in your life, but I know there is. Because conflict is real, it's all around us, and you can't go over. I'm a conflict avoider at my very nature. You can't go around it, you can't go over it, and you can't go under it. The only way to get peace is to go through it.

So some truth-telling? Reach a deal? Some boundaries? Then let it go and move on to what God has for you in the future.

*Gracious God, it's hard work, these things that make for peace. No simple answers. Everyone is at fault in some way or another, and yet you don't abandon us. God, come show us the things that make for peace. Come help us to move forward to be honest with other and understand the truth that each of us experience. Help us to find the boundaries and then to let it go and move on. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*