

Jacob's family Managing conflict

Intro: One of the themes that always seems to resonate in families today is managing conflict. And one of the great problems we face is conflict among siblings. Who among parents has not heard quarrels over everything from toys to telephones? Who has not had some moment when you thought your kids were going to drive you crazy with their constant bickering? Sometimes you feel more like a referee than a parent.

We see the same tendencies in Biblical families and sometimes in extreme. Let's consider together Jacobs's family; and a time in the life of his family when sibling rivalry produced a family crisis that brought division and sorrow to the family.

The story of Jacob's family is a story of conflict. Most students of the Bible know the story of Joseph's sale into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37). Today we look at the underlying causes of the conflict.

The causes of the conflict

How Jacob contributed to the conflict

Jacob's polygamy served as a starting point for much of the conflict.

Though the trickery of Laban, Jacob was given Leah as a wife and then worked an additional seven years for Rachel. Jacob had an obvious preference for Rachel (Gen. 29:30). And the Lord, knowing this, sought to bring some measure of justice to the relationship by giving Leah children first.

Students of the Bible have seen the competition between Leah and Rachel in their attempts to win their husband's favor. Leah bore him Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel in jealousy offered her handmaid Bilhah as a surrogate mother and she bore Dan and Naphtali. When Leah saw this she similarly gave her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob and she bore Gad and Asher.

But the child-bearing competition was not over. Leah would give birth to Issachar and Zebulun. And finally in Jacob's old age, Rachel would finally also have two sons—Joseph and Benjamin. How is hard to imagine that the competition and sub-grouping of the family would not have a powerful negative impact on how the children felt about one another. But Jacob was not going to help by his actions.

Jacob showed an obvious preferential love for the first son of Rachel, Joseph.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. (Genesis 37:3-4)

The meaning of the Hebrew word is not certain. Some suggest that the coat was “highly ornamented”. Some translate “strips of cloth” suggesting multiple textures and colors. However the tunic may have appeared, it was symbol of Joseph’s exaltation in his father’s eyes over his other children.

If only Jacob had remembered how the partiality of his father and mother toward himself and Esau in his formative years had led to so much conflict and sorrow! Yet now he repeats the error. Jacob’s partial treatment of Joseph was to have a lasting impact upon his half-brothers.

How Joseph’s brothers contributed to the conflict

Jacob’s remaining sons were old enough to overcome any feelings of envy and jealousy that they felt. Some of them at least were mature men at the time Joseph was born; and nothing their father or Joseph did could justify their bitter hatred and murderous intentions.

And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. (Gen. 37:4)

Besides, their behavior had not been all that it should be. Reuben had gone into his father’s concubine and brought his father’s judgment upon himself (Gen. 35:22). Simeon and Levi and slaughtered all the males of Shechem’s city because of his rape of Dinah their sister. To these transgressions Moses adds:

Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. (Genesis 37:2)

Some might regard Joseph as a tattle-tale; but it does not appear that his actions were inappropriate in view of their absence from their father. Their own attitudes and disobedience to God contributed to the conflict.

How Joseph contributed to the conflict

Whether one agrees or disagrees with some of Joseph’s actions, he too contributed to the conflict that would arise with his brothers.

He repeatedly revealed dreams he had which clearly suggested that he would be dominant over his brothers and even his parents. (Was there an element of youthful pride showing here?) Though Jacob knew that such dreams could come from the Lord, he consequently kept the dreams in mind; but the brothers would respond violently to the implications of their brother’s dream.

Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. (Genesis 37:5)

Yet Joseph did not stop reporting these incidents and his brothers were indignant. Perhaps we might sense a bit of

taunting in their response to Joseph about the dreams he reported.

Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

(Genesis 37:8)

In one sense, Joseph's godliness, integrity, and trustworthiness became a component in the conflict, since his brothers felt condemned by his actions.

From whatever standpoint we view the conflict between Joseph and his brothers, the underlying cause was sin. Carnality, competition, envy, pride, hatred—all of these lay not only at the root of the conflict in Jacob's family, but at the root of all family conflict. And all of these bitter roots would have their destructive fruit!

Thus the stage was set for an act of consummate hatred. Their hatred had grown to fever pitch and they had decided that nothing would do but to take his life. They used the occasion of his visit to them to seize him. At first they fully planned to kill him; but at the urging of Judah he was sold to slave traders that took him to Egypt. The conflict had led to division in the family. The sadness of the whole episode is only to some degree ameliorated by the knowledge that God would use Joseph's suffering as a path to glory for him and salvation for his family.

The consequences of the conflict

The conflict of the family would result in pain for all participants.

For Jacob, it would mean years of anguish due to the loss of his son.

When the sons brought their ruse, the garment of Joseph dipped in goat's blood, Jacob immediately concluded that his son was dead and his grief was great.

So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him. (Genesis 37:34-35)

For Jacob's sons, it would mean years of guilt due to their part in the mistreatment of Joseph. They would watch their father suffer, knowing that they had deceived him. And perhaps they would wonder, "Will he someday get revenge for our hatred?" Later when Joseph as an Egyptian ruler tested them concerning what they had done, they revealed what had been in their hearts:

Then they said to one another, "Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us." And Reuben answered them, saying, "Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood." (Genesis 42:21-22)

For Joseph, it would mean years of hardship and difficulty before his ascent to power in Egypt. He would be sold as a slave, falsely accused by his master's wife and imprisoned, forgotten by those he helped there. His sufferings lasted for over a decade!

What is clear to us is that in family conflict no one wins! The story reveals what can happen when ungodly attitudes and sinful behavior prevail among siblings.

How can we avoid this conflict and create family harmony?

Hopefully we're never experience the severe manifestations of Jacob's family, but we often still have to deal with the more typical problems of sibling rivalry; and we surely want to parent in ways that prevent and/or effectively manage conflict.

Recognize that sibling rivalry seems to be an inevitable challenge in all homes. It is part of the growth process of children.

Find time to focus on each child's needs and seek to spend some special time alone without the other children present.

Help each child to know your individual love for him/her and the areas of uniqueness that he/she possesses.

Avoid comparing children especially using one to shame or motivate the other.

Be fair in the rules of your household and don't allow partiality to manifest itself. It is easy to feel closer to children based on their temperaments.

Encourage children from early in life to love their brothers and sisters without forcing togetherness.

Insist that they treat each other with respect in language and to respect their personal space and belongings.

Look for underlying causes of anger and frustration that manifest themselves in fighting.

Think of yourself more as a coach than a referee who takes sides. Help them learn how to work out problems by compromise or by application of house rules.

Conclusion: Jacob's family is the sad story of what happens when carnal attitudes get out of hand. By teaching our family the principles of love, selflessness, and mutual respect we can avoid such problems and create an atmosphere conducive to the growth that teaches children how to live with others cooperatively.