

# From Conflict to Community

## Part 1, Genesis 37:1-11

### Genesis 37:1-11 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> *Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.*

<sup>2</sup> *This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.*

<sup>3</sup> *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.*

<sup>4</sup> *When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.*

<sup>5</sup> *Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.*

<sup>6</sup> *He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had:*

<sup>7</sup> *We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."*

<sup>8</sup> *His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.*

<sup>9</sup> *Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."*

<sup>10</sup> *When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?"*

<sup>11</sup> *His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.*

Nothing burns up our life more than conflict. Ongoing conflict is exhausting, upsetting and stressful. According to the Holmes-Rahe life stress inventory, grading life experiences from the most to the least stressful, the second and third most stressful experiences people ever go through are ongoing conflicts that lead to relationship breakdowns. Most people want conflict like they want a hole in the head but there is something about the human condition that makes conflict almost inevitable. We find conflict at home, at work, in sport organisations, political parties, recreational clubs and, even dare I say it, at church. In fact we see conflict in just about every context in which people gather.

So it is not surprising to discover that conflict and conflict resolution are a major subject of the Bible. We only have to read up to the second chapter of the first book of the Bible to come across a major conflict. And then in the fourth chapter you come face to face with the very ugly face of family conflict in which Cain murders his brother Able. The next sixteen books of the Bible are histories chock full of conflict, between family members, clans, nations, some of it horrible and bloody. Then in the middle of the Old Testament you come across a series of wisdom books that, among other things, reflect on the problems associated with conflict

*A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.*  
(Proverbs 15:18)

*Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.*  
(Ecclesiastes 7:9)

Then the last half of the Old Testament contains the writings of the prophets who begin to spell out a message that God wants to end conflict, by firstly changing the heart of the people; *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh"*. (Ezekiel 36:26) and then changing peoples natural inclination towards aggression and violence; He will beat their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning shears and they won't want to go to war anymore (Isaiah 2:4). Pivotal to this change will be a promised Saviour who will be totally unlike any leader before or since, someone who will be both a victim of conflict as well as a resolver of conflict;

*"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* (Isaiah 53:5-6)

He will be the prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6). Then Jesus arises on the stage of history and teaches his disciples, among other things, about how to end conflict and in dying, rising and giving us his spirit he created a new community that could not only deal with conflict but defeat it (Hebrews 12:14-15). Finally, this dream of God, to neutralise conflict is made crystal clear in the description of God's renewed community right at the end of the Bible.

*"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*  
(Revelation 21:3-4)

Over the next four weeks we are going to look carefully at this journey from conflict to community. We are going to probe the nature of conflict in order to understand how it happens and we are also going to look at the good news of Jesus who teaches and demonstrates that people can be resurrected from the tomb of conflict, that we can be healed, that we can be part of a church that moves through conflict into community. But before we head off on this journey we need to recognise there are two different kinds of conflict experiences. There is the general conflict experience in which we play a part and in which there is a lot that can be done in terms of conflict resolution. It's this general kind of conflict that we will be focussing on over the next four weeks. However, there is another kind of conflict experience in which one person is virtually an innocent party experiencing conflict because of someone else's inability to deal with stress or mental illness or personality disorders or drug and alcohol addictions. In these scenarios conflict resolution is often not possible and the journey sometimes needs to be from conflict to safety. While we are not going to dwell a great deal on this type of conflict, we need to say very clearly that such situations are never right and people should always be encouraged to seek help if they are subject to any form of abuse because abuse is never justified.

Moving on, our biblical focus over the next four weeks is going to be on one of the most remarkable examples of the conflict to community journey in all of literature

let alone the Bible, the story of Joseph, of a man whose life is almost extinguished because of conflict and, who through the help of God, becomes a leader who guides his people through conflict into a remarkable community.

One of the really important aspects of this story, which we need to understand is how different young Joseph is from the older Joseph who will literally save his family. Part of what the Bible is leading us to understanding is that the journey from conflict to community is also the journey of self-discovery. Young Joseph begins life as a bit of a prat, which is not surprising when you consider that his father Jacob was a man who spent most of his younger years either scamming his relatives or being scammed in return.

The first thing we learn about Joseph is that he is a tattler, a snitch, telling tales about his brothers to make himself big in the eyes of his father. The second thing we learn is that Joseph is the spoiled youngest son, the child of his old age, who Jacob, now called Israel, dotes on. Ah the youngest child. As the oldest child in my family I understand this very well. By the time my youngest sister came along, mum and dad had mellowed a whole bunch and we will always believe to our dying day, that she got away with blue murder. You see at its core, conflict is an instinctual struggle for a proper share of the cake, whether we are talking about an affection cake, a material cake or a significance cake. Joseph's brothers hate him because as the older brothers they expect more of their father's affection than they were getting. They also expect more of their father's wealth and their conflict with Joseph goes into hypo-drive when Israel gives Joseph an expensive coat, the famous coat of many colours. You see the money for that coat is coming out of the brother's inheritance and they are livered, particularly the oldest sons who utterly believe that by rights they should be the ones getting the presents.

So Joseph's brothers have the galloping hates because Joseph is getting more of the old man's affection and more of the old man's money, you would think that things could hardly get worse between them, unless on top of all this, Joseph was to act like he was better than his brothers, that would make up the complete trifecta of conflict. Which is what happens, Joseph tells the whole family about a dream in which they all bow down to him.

So in these few verses we have clear and distinct picture of conflict. The emotional driver of conflict is frustrated expectations we knowingly or subconsciously carry, about how our life should play out. The brother's expectations of how much affection, wealth and significance they deserve are in total conflict with what is actually going on in the family and they are filled with resentment and rage. But what really heats up the conflict in this family is that Joseph is completely lacking in two critical life skills; character and emotional intelligence. In gleefully lapping up all the indulgence of his father despite the fact it is grossly unfair to all his brothers and sisters, Joseph demonstrates a lack of a moral compass, a lack of character. In tattling on his brothers, flaunting his rich coat and telling them the dream of his future superiority, Joseph demonstrates that he is oblivious to the emotional impact he is having on his family, which is something that we will see radically change in Joseph as he develops emotional intelligence as time goes by.

Now comes the good news for us, this story is teaching us that as horrible, life sucking and paralysing as conflict can be there are things that can be done that help us journey from conflict to community. I want to leave you today with three really helpful questions that can guide us on that journey.

### **1. What are the expectations?**

When Jo and Dave (not their real names) came to me for counselling after six months of married life, they were having some pretty heavy fights over the position of toilet seats and the way toothpaste tubes are squeezed. Of course their conflict had little to do with toilet seats and toothpaste tubes, but had everything to do with their expectations of what married life should look like. She expected that he would continue to treat her as a fragile princess and when he continuously left the toilet seat up she felt unloved. He expected to continue to be treated like a god descending from mount Olympus, with her hanging on to his every word and when she criticised him he felt disrespected. For them the journey from conflict to community began with uncovering their hidden expectations and the discovery that those expectations were not exactly realistic. A whole lot of conflicts can be nipped in the bud if we ask ourselves; what are my expectations concerning how this should play out, and are those expectations reasonable? And what are the expectations of the people on the other side of this conflict and are they reasonable?

### **2. What is the right things to do?**

This is the character question, the chances are high that one or both parties in a conflict have lost their moral compass to the power of the emotions let loose by the conflict. This is certainly true of Joseph's brothers who will contemplate murder and in the end settle for selling their brother into slavery, the big soft hearted sooks. Let's go back to our friends Jo and Dave; at the height of the bathroom wars, Dave had developed the practice of lifting up the toilet seat whenever he passed the bathroom. He knew it was wrong, but he didn't care. Jo for her part had made criticising Dave, for just about anything, a bit of an art form, she also knew deep down that it was not helpful but her hurt was bigger than her moral compass. One of the ways they were able to journey from conflict back to community was at working harder at doing the right thing, doing what people who love each other should do, even if they didn't feel it.

In the story of Joseph, developing character is the bridge that enables Joseph to journey from conflict to community. Joseph is about to have some truly terrible character building experiences. In being falsely imprisoned for some considerable time and feeling truly helpless and powerless, Joseph will develop an incredible capacity to care for others in similar situations, even his brothers, and it will build in him the capacity to forgive. Consequently he will become an amazingly wise leader in his family and heal the past and gather them all together. The good news for us is that followers of Jesus don't have to go through hell in order to develop Christ like characters.

This is what Paul says Jesus will do for us:

*"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the*

*attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)*

And Paul's final words at the end of the same chapter

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)*

### **3. How do I care for this person?**

In the Joseph story there is a really beautiful moment when Joseph discovers that his key to freedom is not found in revenge upon his brothers but in learning to genuinely care about them, and for them. This is not in any way a normal way to deal with conflict, this is a Christian way. Normally conflicts escalate, with associated increases in dislike until the relationship breaks down completely. The Christian way is to short circuit that process through loving our enemies (Luke 6:35). When we ask God to help us love someone we loath, two things happen, God begins to deal with our negative emotions and God opens up ways and possibilities of reaching the heart of our enemy.

A minister mate of mine found that he had an enemy in his congregation, and his enemy was the church treasurer. No matter what my friend planned for the life of the church, the treasurer opposed it. Whatever my friend did the treasurer criticised. Every meeting ended in some kind of conflict with the treasurer and it was making him sick with the stress of it all. One day he was away for a few days on retreat, and poured out this situation to God in prayer, and God began to do that thing that God does and gave him a revelation about his enemy, about how empty his life really was, how important the role of treasurer was to him emotionally and how fearful he was of change. Most importantly God gave the minister a strategy for dealing with the treasurer and when he went back to work he began to regularly pastorally visit the man he had been avoiding for over a year. At first the treasurer continued to be a little hostile but after the minister had demonstrated by his actions that he had no other agenda other than just seeing how the treasurer was going, the treasurer began to soften in a really big way and the level of conflict went from about 10 to 2.

I'm going to ask you to pray now but I recognise this is a huge and complex issue, and we have just scratched the surface of it. And you may be thinking that I really haven't touched on the kind of conflict in your life. Here's the bottom line, God cares that you are having a bad time and God can help you with whatever it is. Let's pray.

### The Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory

#### The Social Readjustment Rating Scale

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Mark down the point value of each of these life events that has happened to you during the previous year. Total these associated points.

Life Event	Mean Value
1. Death of spouse	100
2. Divorce	73
3. Marital Separation from mate	65
4. Detention in jail or other institution	63
5. Death of a close family member	63
6. Major personal injury or illness	53
7. Marriage	50
8. Being fired at work	47
9. Marital reconciliation with mate	45
10. Retirement from work	45
11. Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	44
12. Pregnancy	40
13. Sexual Difficulties	39
14. Gaining a new family member (i.e., birth, adoption, older adult moving in, etc)	39
15. Major business readjustment	39
16. Major change in financial state (i.e., a lot worse or better off than usual)	38
17. Death of a close friend	37
18. Changing to a different line of work	36
19. Major change in the number of arguments w/spouse (i.e., either a lot more or a lot less than usual regarding child rearing, personal habits, etc.)	35
20. Taking on a mortgage (for home, business, etc..)	31
21. Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan	30
22. Major change in responsibilities at work (i.e. promotion, demotion, etc.)	29
23. Son or daughter leaving home (marriage, attending college, joined mil.)	29
24. In-law troubles	29
25. Outstanding personal achievement	28
26. Spouse beginning or ceasing work outside the home	26
27. Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	26
28. Major change in living condition (new home, remodeling, deterioration of neighborhood or home etc.)	25
29. Revision of personal habits (dress manners, associations, quitting smoking)	24
30. Troubles with the boss	23
31. Major changes in working hours or conditions	20
32. Changes in residence	20
33. Changing to a new school	20
34. Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	19
35. Major change in church activity (i.e., a lot more or less than usual)	19
36. Major change in social activities (clubs, movies, visiting, etc.)	18
37. Taking on a loan (car, tv, freezer, etc)	17
38. Major change in sleeping habits (a lot more or a lot less than usual)	16
39. Major change in number of family get-togethers ("")	15
40. Major change in eating habits (a lot more or less food intake, or very different meal hours or surroundings)	15
41. Vacation	13
42. Major holidays	12
43. Minor violations of the law (traffic tickets, jaywalking, disturbing the peace, etc)	11

**Now, add up all the points you have to find your score.**

**150pts or less** means a relatively low amount of life change and a low susceptibility to stress-induced health breakdown.

**150 to 300 pts** implies about a 50% chance of a major health breakdown in the next 2 years.

**300pts or more** raises the odds to about 80%, according to the Holmes-Rahe statistical prediction model.