

February 22, 2009
Rhinos, Hedgehogs, or Chameleons?
Genesis 25:19-34

Conflict (disagreement, difference of opinion, tension, stress) is inevitable. If there are two or more people in any kind of relationship, the potential for conflict is present: we have different opinions; we have our own interests; we are naturally selfish (I don't even need two people: I can find myself in internal conflict - I can come up with different opinions, options, and ideas all on my own!). Conflict is not necessarily always a bad thing. When we come to an issue with different ideas, strategies, possibilities or opinions, we have the potential for an incredibly creative time of learning and growth.

But when we don't handle conflict properly relationships can go from bad to worse. Some people are like:

- Rhinos - when they feel tension they attack
- Hedgehogs - when they feel threatened they withdraw or create walls
- Chameleons - they agree with everything (on the surface anyway), but you never know who they really are or what they really think ("Yes dear," "Uh huh," "I'm sorry"); then they bite you.

Do you recognize yourself in any of these types?

Brotherly un-love

Isaac and Rebekah, like Abraham and Sarah before them, had a difficult time conceiving a child. In fact, twenty years had gone by from their wedding until these twin boys, Jacob and Esau, were born. From the very beginning there was conflict as the babies "*jostled each other within her*" (25:22). Their oracle Rebekah was given foretold conflict. The nature of their birth (Jacob grasping Esau's heel) implied rivalry. Their radically different appearances, lifestyles, and temperaments certainly created the potential for tension and conflict. The fact that Isaac and Rebekah each favoured one over the other, further divided them.

Running in the background is the issue of "birthright." The birthright was the oldest son's share of the family's wealth and property. The firstborn (in this case, Esau) received a double share of the inheritance. If there were twelve sons in a family, the estate would be divided into thirteen, with oldest son receiving two shares. If there were only two, as in Isaac's case, the estate would be divided into three: Esau should receive two thirds of Isaac's wealth and land; Jacob one third. Isaac was a wealthy man; there was a lot at stake here!

On one fateful day Esau arrives back from his travelling and hunting famished. Whether he is literally at death's door or just using hyperbole, he asks for some of Jacob's stew. Jacob offers to sell his brother some, for Esau's birthright (why was that on Jacob's mind? ... this has been something that he has been musing over for a while). Esau foolishly says, "*If I die, it doesn't do me any good anyway!*" The deal is done. We may say, "So what!" But in that culture this was

horrific! You did not do that! We have lots of legal documents and other texts from the ancient near east, but none include anything like this. It was not done. The financial cost was huge. But more important was the message Esau was conveying here. As the text says, by doing this, Esau "despised" his birthright. He treated it with contempt. He was saying his family heritage didn't matter. In the ancient near east that was as unthinkable as wishing your father dead.

There is conflict here! In fact, as these brothers' relationship develops it gets to the point where Esau says to himself, *"I'm going to kill my brother Jacob"* - and he means it (27:41).

How does it come to this?

How does it get to this point? How do relationships get to the point where we feel passion, rage, frustration, and angst to the point we just want to explode? Here are some contributors:

1. *Different people who don't respect one another.* Esau and Jacob are like night and day. They look different. They act differently. They have different interests. They relate to different people. They think differently. They value different things. They have different types of intelligence. Differences don't HAVE to cause conflict. In fact they can enrich and enliven relationships. But that can only happen when there is mutual respect and when people are open and willing to learn from one another ... I get the sense that mutual respect and appreciation of their differences is not happening here!
2. *Communication doesn't happen.* It appears that they live separate lives. Jacob certainly has no respect for Esau. He is a classic chameleon ... saying nice things, but working behind Esau's back to get him. Esau is a rhino - he explodes, slams the tent flap, then walks away. They never work things through. Had they worked on their relationship - or been challenged to do so by their parents, this might never have happened ...
3. *There is no commitment to relationship.* Jacob would be quite happy to have Esau dead. The feeling will become mutual - right now Esau likely doesn't even give Jacob a thought. There is no commitment here to say, *"We're family - let's make it work."*
4. *Things have been festering.* This incident doesn't come out of the blue. Jacob has been working on this one for a while. Chances are he has tried before. Esau should not have been surprised. Mom and Dad - Rebekah and Isaac - undoubtedly saw problems between the boys. The whole financial and social inequality inherent in the "birthright system" needed to be talked about and addressed. But no one, apparently, did anything ...
5. *A decision is made in a moment of crisis.* When I'm in a crisis situation, I generally don't make smart decisions. Esau certainly didn't! Yes, physically he is exhausted. Yes, emotionally he is probably weak. But did he have options? Of course! There must have been something to else eat around. He could have bought time: *"We'll talk about birthrights later ..."* He could have negotiated ...
6. *Selfishness and greed.* What about Jacob??? He is a nasty piece of work! Nowhere are his actions condoned. He is greedy, selfish, deceptive (and we'll see in Genesis 27), a liar, and a thief. There is no spirit of brotherly love here.

In our relationships, if we don't respect one another, if we can't (or won't) communicate, if we

have no commitment to work things out, if we allow things to fester, if we make decisions during crises, and if we allow selfishness and greed to control our actions ... conflict will happen.

Preventing conflict in the first place

Could this incident have been avoided? Let's just turn these six "problems" into "preventions":

1. *Respect one another's differences.* All of us ARE different! That's reality. If we accept that as reality, great! That's a start. Going further, we need to recognize that we are not going to change one another - the only person we can change is ourselves. Next, we have to appreciate our differences as strengths, resources, and creative opportunities that can make life richer and more meaningful and can help us solve challenges that emerge. Working as a team - friends, a couple, whomever - we can be and do so much ...
2. *Communicate, communicate, communicate.* Last week we talked about some of the principles of good communication. Here are some others: look for the good in the other person; give them a compliment; take time to listen to one another; don't interrupt; listen to understand, not to judge; use active listening ("What I think I hear you saying is ..."); share your feelings using "I" statements (don't put words into our peoples mouths) ...
3. *Be committed to relationship.* "We're family - let's make it work." That is what someone - Isaac, Rebekah, Esau or Jacob - should have said. But one did. Sometime, someone has to step up to plate as the "adult" in a relationship and take "the bull by the horns" - whatever the bull in your relationship is. Identify the issue.
4. *Don't let things fester.* If there is a problem, nip it in the bud! The sooner you deal with a potential conflict, the better! If we don't happen, we can get into a downward cycle of criticism and blame ... Henry Ford said, "Don't find fault, find a remedy." Great advice!
5. *Don't make a decision in a moment of crisis.* "The important is seldom urgent and the urgent is seldom important" is a good piece of folk wisdom by which to live! When in doubt, buy time and then take the time to do process well (next point)
6. *Watch yourself and your motivation.* Our calling is to "love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength" and to "love our neighbour as ourselves." Is that the way we are living? Is that the way we are thinking? Or are we really motivated by selfishness? Greed? Power? Prestige? Are we thinking of the welfare of the OTHER person first? Have we tried to "walk a mile in their moccasins" to try to understand how they feel? How would I feel if I had to relate to me? What would Jesus do?

But there is a problem already

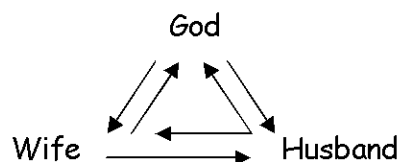
Even if we have a great relationship, we communicate well, we're committed to working things through, stressors come along! We have to make major decisions. We do disagree - quite strongly perhaps - on how things should be handled. How do we handle these situations well? What should have happened in Isaac and Rebekah's family?

Rhinos charge. Hedgehogs run into their castle and pull up the drawbridge. Chameleons try to avoid the whole thing by changing their true colours but may be conniving to get their way,

somehow, anyhow ... None of these are healthy ways to deal with things! So here we go ... This takes time (what we'll summarize here only sounds easy) - take time to work through these steps.¹ In premarital counselling, I encourage couples to:

1. Set a specific time and place to talk about the issue.
2. Define the problem or issue up for discussion clearly - use a symbolic object to represent it. Don't confuse the issue with the other person.
3. Each of you tells how you contribute to the problem. Don't speak for the other person, only yourself!
4. Discuss what you have tried in the past? What has worked? Why? Why not?
5. Brainstorm. List all the possible solutions.
6. Discuss and evaluate those solutions.
7. Agree on a strategy to work on.
8. Clearly define what each one of you will do to make this solution work.
9. Establish a follow up appointment time to evaluate how things are going.
10. Encourage and affirm one another as you work towards resolution.

Above, below, behind, and in front of all of this has to be a fundamental commitment to God. In a marriage we often draw it as triangle (but it could refer to any relationship):



The reality is that God is the centre of every one of our relationships as people of God. We need to pray for one another - pray with one another - when we sense conflict. James, speaking to the early church, which was rife with conflict, writes, "*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other ...*" (James 5:16). Note, he doesn't say, "*Confess the other person's sins*" but "*your sins*"; he encourages us to make those "I" statements ...

Solomon gives us this wisdom: "*A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken*" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). When the third person is God - there is profound strength! God can get us through our challenges enriched, enlivened, and empowered ... if we humble ourselves before God and seek His wisdom and guidance in our relationships.

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First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net

¹ These come from *Building a Strong Marriage Workbook* (PREPARE/ENRICH).