

Message: Conflict, Choice & Assurance***Playing with Fire¹***

“Scott’s wife Andrea remembers getting the phone call. ‘Is this Mrs. Nehring?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Is your husband Scott?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Does he have any health problems?’ ‘Why? What’s going on?’ ‘Don’t ask any questions. Does he have any health problems?’ ‘Not to my knowledge.’ ‘Well, he collapsed at the bank. We’ve got people here working on him.’”

Andrea didn’t know if her husband would live or die, and the turbulent early years of their marriage now seemed insignificant. The couple met in college, and married while still in school. Andrea remembers. “It was kind of a whirlwind romance and we were engaged fairly shortly after we started dating.”

Scott had been keeping a part of his life hidden from Andrea. He cleaned up his act long enough to win her over, but it didn’t last. Scott explains, “I started to do the drugs again. I started to drink very heavily. Months after I got married I started to cheat on my wife and it destroyed her.”

Andrea was devastated. “I just felt sick. Six months in he told me that he wanted a divorce. And I think I found out about the girl about a month after that.”

The couple separated. Andrea left school and moved in with her parents, where she renewed her relationship with Jesus. Over time, she forgave her husband, and started praying that he would give his life to Christ. Andrea says she refused to give up on their marriage. “I’ve been told that you’re not to give up on him. So I didn’t. We prayed a lot. I got my strength from the Lord and from my family.”

After two years, they agreed to get back together and begin working on their marriage. Soon, they had their first child. One night, Scott had a disturbing dream. He vividly remembers, “In this dream there were slopes of mud and muck and running filthy water and I was rolling in this stuff. Something grabbed me and pulled me down under the water and I couldn’t break free. I knew that dream was not a dream, but a warning.”

¹ http://www.cbn.com/700club/features/amazing/RT64_Scott_Nehring.aspx

He woke Andrea. She asked him, “Do you want to say the sinner’s prayer? Are you finally ready to give your heart to the Lord?” “I did,” Scott remembers. “I got down on my knees and I gave myself to Christ and I begged for forgiveness for everything that I’ve done.” Afterwards, Scott started taking his family to church. But the fighting at home continued. Andrea explains, “He had some internal conflict that he was working out, but that internal conflict, I guess often came out in anger.”

One day Scott, a seemingly healthy 38 year old, walked into the bank, and suffered a massive heart attack. By the time he hit the floor, he was already dead, and time was running out. Amazingly, paramedics were only a block away and arrived at the scene within two minutes. They worked furiously on Scott until finally, they got a heartbeat.

“I had what was known as a widow maker and 4% of the people survive. There was no reason for me to be able to make it through that horrible, horrible thing.” Scott recollects. Andrea knows, “He couldn’t deny how the Lord choreographed his survival. It was so detailed. And he couldn’t deny it. So he knew that the Lord saved him for a reason.”

Scott spent only a few days in the hospital. When he came home, he was not the same person. “When you die and you come back, that’s what you’re left with. Immediately it was my family, my wife, Christ was the only thing that mattered,” he said. “I became a better father and I became a much better husband.

“Giving myself to Christ and living my life for Him has allowed for me to actually become the man that I should have been all along,” he said. Andrea tearfully describes the change. “He really has come full circle. And, I’m very grateful.” Scott concludes, “When you give yourself to Christ, it’s not an issue of whether you deserve it or not. You don’t. But it’s an issue of His grace and His gift. And it’s a beautiful thing.””(CBN)

God’s grace is a gift, even when we don’t understand or deserve it. That was the case for Scott and Andrea it was the same for Isaac and Rebekah. We read about their struggles in Genesis 25:19-34. Abraham and Sarah are no longer the focus of God’s mission on Earth; Isaac, Rebekah and their twin sons are. Their relationship, which had such a wonderful beginning, hits a rough spot that has serious consequences for

their family and descendents. Actually, before the twins arrive, we find the couple with a problem: they can't have children. The Bible says Rebekah is barren, just like Sarah was. Isaac learned an important lesson from Abraham: have faith in God and the covenant. So Isaac prays for Rebekah and God answers: she becomes pregnant. This is a gift from God!

Only there's a problem. It's a difficult pregnancy. So much so Rebekah wonders what's wrong and she asks God what's going on. God answers, *“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”* This is a pretty cryptic message, which may not have been understood until the twins were born. That's when the “twos” make more sense. The two children she is carrying will be the founders of two nations, who will be divided and in conflict. Later in Genesis, we learn Esau will found the nation of Edom while Jacob will be the founder of the nation of Israel. Some scholars believe the Edomites were the ancestors of the Idumeans of Jesus' time. The two peoples have always been in conflict. Proof is found throughout the Old Testament.

There is another reason for conflict that's contained in the second phrase, *“the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”* Esau was a stronger man physically; he was also the elder, so he was entitled to the blessing and birthright of his father, Isaac. However, God told Rebekah the older would serve the younger. This is a recipe for conflict. I don't know about you, but anytime the older kid in our family have to follow the younger ones, conflict always seems to follow. We see that a lot in our grandniece Olivia and our grandnephew Lucas, who are 6 and 3. They and their parents, Dia and Dodi, are wonderful. Olivia has the heart of a field marshal – she's been directing her older cousins around for years. Whenever Lucas gets to be in charge though, accusations, shouting and tears soon follow. We might laugh, yet the same thing happens in families around the world as happened in Isaac and Rebekah's family. This isn't always the case, though. There are families where sibling rivalry doesn't seem to follow this pattern.

You would think Isaac and Rebekah’s family would be different. The loving parents have a double blessing from God – twin boys after twenty years of trying for a child. Isaac got a wonderful gift at 60 years of age. Grandpa Abraham dotes on them for several years and life is good. Yet, the family seems to take the more difficult path. Rather than receiving God’s grace and managing the gift in unity and harmony, rifts appear.

From birth the boys have different personalities and this did not help the marriage. Scripture tells us Esau “*was a skillful hunter, a man of the field*” and Isaac loved him because “*he was fond of game.*” Esau was self-sufficient, independent, perhaps gregarious, a man’s man. On the other hand, Scripture tells us Jacob “*was a quiet man, living in tents.*” Jacob was quieter, a stay-at-home man, mostly likely a momma’s boy, always ready to help. Rebekah loved him. How did that happen?

Isaac and Rebekah received a gift from God, yet they ended up choosing opposite sides when it came to raising their children. This was not healthy, but divisive. Jesus said, “*if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand*” in Mark 3:25. So what’s happening? 1 Corinthians 3:3 offers some insight, “*You are still controlled by your own sinful desires. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your own desires? You are acting like people who don't belong to the Lord.*” Rather than seeking to do God’s will, Isaac and Rebekah end up following their own desires. And the apples don’t fall far from the tree; the boys learn and follow the same path.

One incident is recorded to illustrate how strained the boy’s relationship was. Esau came in from the fields, ravenously hungry, to find Jacob cooking a pot of lentils. Rather than giving his brother some of the food, Jacob makes a bargain with Esau. He asks Esau to swear an oath to give up his birthright – a double portion of the inheritance, for a bowl of food. Esau carelessly makes the agreement. Here we see the brothers bargaining with each other for favors. They see each other as rivals, rather than showing brotherly love. There was great conflict within the family, even to the point of Esau hating Isaac and seeking to kill Jacob at a later date. Fortunately, the brothers were reconciled, but that was

decades later after the pattern was set – bad blood would exist between their children and descendants later.

There is another, key point to consider. What part did God play in the conflict? Was the conflict predestined because of Jacob’s election by God? This is a very difficult concept. We know from v34 that “*Esau despised his birthright.*” This is harsh language. It shows Esau’s lack of responsibility. He is unwilling or unfit to inherit the promise made to Abraham and his family by God and to faithfully pass it along to his children. Esau was the weaker person, spiritually. Jacob was the stronger even though he was deceitful. God freely chose Jacob – the younger, to have authority over Esau – the older. This creates a tension between God’s choice of Jacob and Esau’s responsibility for freely selling his birthright to Jacob.

Romans 9:10-13 talks about God’s choice to freely show mercy and compassion as God chooses – not according to the will or works of humans, because God is just. I believe we need to keep one thought in mind: God did not need the conflict in their home to accomplish his plan. God does not lead us to sin to achieve his ends! God would have fulfilled his promise to Isaac and Rebekah regardless of the conditions at home – divisive or harmonious. They freely chose lives of conflict. God worked through their conflict to keep his promise, just as God will work through our conflicts today to keep the promise of the new covenant with us.

In the same way, God’s grace draws us to Jesus for salvation. We know that from John 6:44, “*No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.*” By God’s grace, we have the freedom and responsibility to willingly call Jesus Lord and ask for forgiveness of our sins. John 3:16-17 clearly tells us to be assured, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*”

I pray you choose Jesus and the path of brotherly love over conflict.

Genesis 25:19-34(NRSV)

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.”

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Romans 8:1–11 (NRSV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law - indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.