

“Defend, End or Mend?”

Genesis 37

Series: Mend – Week 1 Mend begins with ME

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From the outside it looks like every other home on the block in this New York neighborhood. Step inside and you'll see something strange: a wall. Now of course you'd expect walls separating the kitchen, dining room and living room. This wall is different. It divides the whole house. During divorce proceedings Simon and Chana Taub could only agree on one thing: *The house is mine*. Both refused to move out. So the court ordered a wall built through the middle of their living room.

Now, to get to his dining room, Simon must go up a neighbor's outside stairs, step over a balcony, and climb through a window. Chana complains Simon makes her life a nightmare by yelling, banging on walls, and turning off her heat when it's cold out. They each vow to stay in the house until the other moves. So apparently a house divided against itself can still stand. The occupants just can't stand each other.

Relationships make life worth living. Yet when walls go up, when we can't communicate, things come to a standstill or a standoff. Right now the fabric of one of your relationships may be stretched or strained, it may be scratched, snagged, slashed or severed. There may not be a physical wall dividing your domicile but a wall of silence separating you. It may be a cold war or a hot one.

This series, Mend, is about healing our relationships using Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs and other stories in God's Word. Proverbs promises us:

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed. Proverbs 3:13-14, 17-18

If we live by God's wisdom our relationships will follow pleasant and peaceful paths, they will be filled with life and blessedness. With God's Wisdom you can start to heal and restore the ripped fabric of your relationships. Now you might think great heroes of the Bible used God's Wisdom to prevent their relationships from getting frayed, tattered or shredded. But that's not the case. Check out the life of Jacob.

With his arthritic aged hands, he picks up the once regal, multicolored, finely-woven coat. His tired eyes tear up as he surveys the savage rips and blood stains. The shredded robe in his arms was a gift he gave to his beloved 17 year old son Joseph. Father Jacob can only conclude "Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has been torn to pieces" (Genesis 37:33). Little does he know the ferocious animals now surround him. They are his other ten sons.

Jacob is the son of Isaac who is the son of Abraham. He is the patriarch over twelve sons and a daughter. You'll find his story in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. His family may be biblical but they are also dysfunctional. In the circle of Jacob's home there is envy, jealousy, favoritism, resentment, neglect and even abuse. These things still happen today. And as with most families, the sins of the children begin with the sins of the parents. Jacob is such a wily and deceptive con artist who he goes by two unflattering names. "Jacob" means "supplanter." In other words, he sneakily steals someone else's place. His other alias is "Israel" which means "the one who wrestles with God." Get the picture? This "Bible hero" gives everyone, including God, a run for their money.

But Jacob also has his share of trials. He fathers at least thirteen children by four different women. A blended family can make you feel, at times, like you are in a blender. Imagine how hard it is for all of them to live under one roof. His family is a perfect example of why God is against polygamy. The usual tension, competition, and sibling rivalry are magnified in this household. To make matters worse Jacob favors his wife Rachel and her children, Joseph and Benjamin. He lets them stay home while the others sweat in the fields and herd the sheep. Joseph often tattles on them. When Rachel dies, Jacob's love and favor for Joseph increase. So does the seething resentment of the brothers. "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" (Genesis 37:4). They are furious when Jacob wraps Joseph in a regal, colorful, finely-woven coat. The symbol of this coat is not lost on Jacob's other sons. It is a suit suitable for a prince. They know Jacob is declaring Joseph to be his heir and their master.

So the stage is set for the final stroke to bring down the boy prince. And the last straws are Joseph's dreams which he foolishly tells them.

"Listen to this dream I had: 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." 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. Genesis 37:6-8

That's it. When they see the teen approach in his fancy coat, they conspire to murder him. 'Here he comes – the king of dreams! Let's kill him and throw his body in this cistern. We'll say wild animals tore him apart. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.'

When Joseph arrives the wild pack of wolves pick him up, rip off his prince suit, toss him down the hole and roll a stone in place. After a time, the stone is removed. Rough hands reach down and yank him out. Cords are quickly tied around his wrists. The Bedouins who buy him drag him to their caravan. As they lead him away on foot to Egypt he takes a last backward glance to see his brothers laughing and dividing the few coins they got for selling him into slavery.

There is still one final act: the cover up. The boys learned the art of deception from the old master, their father. Ripping the fancy coat, they spatter it with goat's blood and present it to their father. As they watch their father descend into grief, the magnitude

of their sin finally hits home. “What have we done?” Their family is as shredded as the slashed and bloody robe.

The clan of Jacob is a tragic lot. Though they may be more extreme, they are not so different from us. When you think about your tangled and tattered relationship, ask yourself this question: Do I want to defend, end or mend?

We all can **Defend** – that is defend where we are right and others wrong. Every member of this family plays a part in this tragedy. We still do the same today. Some of us are Jacobs: preferring one child over others. Kids can tell who the favorite is. Some of us may be Josephs: boasting and building ourselves up at the expense of others. Showing off his coat and bragging about his dreams only led him to the bottom of a pit. Some of us are like the brothers: smoldering with anger. Resentment brought to a full boil can drive us to acts we later regret. Buried anger, like a forgotten landmine, still explodes.

It’s easy to point out the wrong in others. You may even catch yourself listing their errors in your mind like an attorney arguing a case in court. This builds walls.

Whoever loves a quarrel loves sin; whoever builds a high gate invites destruction.
Proverbs 17:19

Often your opponent is doing the same.

A brother wronged is more unyielding than a fortified city; disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel. Proverbs 18:19

When walls are raised and combatants deeply entrenched you get a standoff or stalemate which can last for days, months and years. At some point, you may decide to **End** the relationship. You don’t want to speak with them. You want nothing to do with them. You disown or divorce the person. You treat them as if they are dead.

My great grandfather Haig Simsarian fled the Armenian Genocide as a boy. He became a great man in his community. But he was also a little like Jacob. His wife died young, leaving him to raise five daughters. He loved them all, but he also loved to play them against each other. So much so, that when he died at 98, they were not speaking to each other. And when my grandmother Lucy, his second daughter, died at 80, she left specific instructions for her funeral. There was to be no open casket and we were not to invite her four sisters. We complied with her first request but ignored the second. Why? It was time for the fight to end and the healing to begin.

Instead of defending a position or ending the relationship, the Lord asks us to try a different path. He calls us to **Mend** it.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. Proverbs 3:5-8

To heal your life and relationships, the Lord invites us to lean, not on our own understanding of a situation, but on His perspective. Our biased perspective may not give us a complete or accurate picture of the problem. We may not see other possible solutions. We may not be aware of our contributions to the breakup or breakdown. We need to look at what we did to tear the relationship.

So how do you begin? Remember that **Mend starts with ME**. Begin by looking within. Proverbs says I always think I am right.

All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.
Proverbs 16:2

Remember those times when, in your mind, you argued your case in court? When that happens, pause and look at the bench. There sits the Lord who judges and weighs not just your opponent's motives but yours as well. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What did I do or say to stretch or sever the relationship?
- What ignited my anger and how can I respond differently?
- Where am I being selfish?
- What do I fear I will lose: a possession, a position, my power, my pride?
- Why do I keep falling into this unhealthy pattern with this person?

These are a few questions to get you started. Reflect on your part in prayer before the Lord who reveals our motives. Let Him show you a way to heal and mend the tear.

Joseph survived slavery. Despite more mistreatment, false accusations and an unjust jail sentence Joseph eventually rose, with God's help, to become Prime Minister of Egypt. Years later his brothers came down to Egypt, bowed down to him and begged him for food. Thinking Joseph was dead, they did not recognize him. His boyhood dream came true. Now, what would he do? Fulfill dreams of vengeance? Put them through the nightmare he endured? He could. He possessed the power to crush them. They knew it.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"
Genesis 50:15

Still lying to save their skins, the brothers concoct a story that their father Jacob on his deathbed gave instructions for Joseph.

'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father. Genesis 50:17

When Joseph receives this message he doesn't tear the relationship. He breaks down in tears. The brothers throw themselves down before him in shame. Yet he lifts them up.

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Genesis 50:19-21

Joseph raised his eyes from his own anger and resentment and saw God’s greater plan. He mended the torn and bloodied fabric of his family. He not only kept his family alive but also made it possible for God to bring from his family our Savior Jesus.

They hadn’t even finished the two week honeymoon before they found themselves in what they call “Marriage Hell.”

We knew our relationship was in serious trouble. We had been warned about five areas of potential conflict and we immediately jumped into all five of them: sex, communication, money, children, and in-laws. Then we argued about our arguments and began to layer resentment on top of resentment, it was a perfect setup for misery and disenchantment.

This happens to a lot of couples but you may not expect it to be the story of Rick and Kay Warren, one of the most public Christian couples in America. They worked on healing the tears in their relationship but it was an agonizing process. Kay writes,

I don't approach this subject from the Hallmark-card version of marriage but from the blood, sweat, and tears of the trenches where our marriage was forged and is sustained. I know what it's like to choose to build our relationship; to seek marriage counseling again and again; to allow our small group and our family into the struggle; to determine one more time to say, "Let's start over" and "Please forgive me, I was wrong" and "I forgive you." I know what it's like to admit that my way isn't the only way to see the world and to try to imagine what it's like to be on the other side of me; to choose to focus on what is good and right and honorable in my husband instead of what drives me crazy; to turn attraction to another man into attraction to my husband. ... I know what it's like to be cracked open by catastrophic grief and to share it with your spouse when you're so different.

The grief she mentions is the suicide of their son. It’s been very hard. Yet Kay and Rick have done the hard work of mending their tears. She adds,

It’s been the very best thing that has ever happened to either of us. We wouldn't be who we are today without each other.¹

Don’t build walls. Mend. It begins with ME.

¹ Kay Warren, "We Were in Marital Hell," Christianity Today (June 2017)