

A Brother Offended

Proverbs 18:19

“A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.” - Proverbs 18:19.

Solomon, as most people know, had a huge family. With 600 wives and 300 concubines one can be certain that between the offspring of his concubinage and the in-laws, and what had to be conflict between the wives and concubines, I can only imagine what the atmosphere of the living areas had to be like. It had to be true that, as in Jacob’s life, who had more than one spouse, but not nearly as many as Solomon, there was real and vehement antagonism constantly.

Now, it is fairly certain that in our day, where multiple marriage is illegal in most US states, the conflict is a bit less pronounced. But there are any number of ways, even in a relationship where there is but one wife, for offense to multiply itself. When we think of extended family, even friends that are close to us, and perhaps we might include here the friends and family that is a part of our church circle; Solomon is telling us of both the undesirable nature of these offenses, as well as the great difficulty of mending those damaged “fences”.

“Brother” is a Hebrew word that can be used in a number of contexts, referring to

- brothers (in a single sense) or
- brethren (referring to the plural group as a single entity),
- to the brother as one of the same parents,
- one with some degree or manner of kinship, like the same tribe for instance, or some other kinship group.
- And even a brother in resemblance or some pronounced likeness.

“Offended” can speak of that which breaks or has broken away in some sense; varying from minor to propound. We should note that the word here is a verb and is a participle, seeing the action of the word for us to consider. We should consider that it is also in the Hebrew passive form as well. So we might translate it as “is being offended”. The process is initiated by another, a relative it appears, and causes offense to the one in view. The implication is that it is a wrong behavior, in some cases it can be used to imply criminal behavior. The one being offended is definitely doing that which is untoward and lays responsibility upon the shoulders of the one whom is “indulging” in being offended. It is, perhaps, to be seen as being either undeserved or held more harshly than is warranted.

The phrase the comes after the statement of being offended - “...is harder to be won than a strong city” is a phrase carrying the idea of military capabilities (or, as in this case, the lack of same). The city in view here is

strongly fortified with, perhaps tall and/or thick walls, solid defense, and so on; any number of things that make such a city difficult to take.

The beginning of the second phrase is started with the word “Contentions” meaning quarreling or the pleasing of one’s cases in this context meaning an insistent argumentation concerning one’s point of view. We might offer it as vehemently demanding one’s own way in a matter. You can almost hear the back and forth of the virtually childish exchange of demand here. It is no wonder that Solomon speaks of how difficult such an exchange is to reconcile and set aside if it is to continue for any length of time.

That phrase is followed by “...the bars of a castle (or citadel)”. It was the bars that made the castle secure and prevented illicit entry into it. Thus, it is speaking of the difficulty to resolve conflict with those who are very close to us, once it has taken root (been barred, so to speak). The implication here is that, because it is so very difficult to set aside, we **MUST** be very, very careful to avoid it starting. Remember that there is the implication here that the conflict spoken of here is one that to some degree (if not totally) is our fault and we bear responsibility for both ends of it:

- The initiation and/or intensifying of the conflict.
- The difficulty and/or failure of solving it.

This is not to say that all conflicts with those close to us are our fault, but just that great care must be taken to avoid either worsening it or preventing or refusing its’ solution.

To rehearse the interpretation in shorter terms for us - Quite opposite versions of this proverb are given. But the Authorized Version is in accordance with the text of the original. Dissensions between brethren are the hardest to be composed. The allusion in the previous saying (ver. 18) to the ceasing of contentions, may have suggested a case in which it is too often impossible to make them cease.

There are a number of illustrations that are useful here:

- The implacable nature of quarrels between brothers is seen in the cases of Cain with Abel, Joseph’s brethren with himself,
- Absalom with Amnon, where nothing short of death was resolved and plotted.
- Esau with Jacob - How hard to be won was Esau; how long did his “strong city” hold out! and though himself conciliated, was not the enmity perpetuated between the descendants of the two brothers from generation to generation (Numb. 20:14–21; Ezek. 35:5; Obad. 10–14)?
- Grace, however, will triumph, as where the “sharp contention” which for a while separated two brother Apostles, was completely and finally healed (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Thinking by way of application we see how true and useful it is that experience confirms and history attests the truth of this saying. No quarrels are (proverbially) so difficult to heal as family quarrels, no feuds so irreconcilable as those between brothers, when they have reached a head. The proverb is true also in a measure of those who have been close friends, and even of members of the same fraternity. As “blood is thicker than water,” as the love implanted by nature is of the strongest, so when that natural affection gives place to enmity, there are no bounds to its vehemence. Again, as “the sweeter the wine the sharper the vinegar,” so closest friendship has often turned to deadliest hatred. The “odium theologicum,” which finds its counterpart in other professions, has its root in the overweening value naturally attached by men to their own opinions on matters they are specially conversant with and have very much at heart. In all such cases, a breach is the more deeply to be lamented, inasmuch as unity would have been a widespread blessing. I must as a brother not take liberties, not expect too much, and “leave off contention” betimes (17:14). It is generally best for brothers, however attached, not to become closely associated in business matters, unless as men of business. Friends who are not related should remember that intimacy, when it degenerates into undue familiarity, is perilously near a turning-point. From professional’ quarrels (alas! even over the sacrament of love!) largeness of heart is the alone preservative. For my part, let me have but one enemy—the devil, with him never be reconciled, with my brother never fall out!