

BEING CHRISTLIKE IN CONFLICT: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT¹

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Introduction

I AM HONORED to have a place in this conference where we consider the tremendous impact that our Savior made through his Holy Spirit, also upon the life of the church in the older covenant era. The Scripture is not silent about the conflicts that have attended the life of the church throughout her history. Such conflict takes on many forms. Dr. Strange's presentation reminded us all that the world keeps impinging itself upon the people of the church. Political storms outside of the walls of the church are felt by Christian people within those walls. Conflict results.

So where do we start? We could speak about the so-called "weeping prophet," Jeremiah, who was in great conflict with the leaders of Judah in his day. That conflict was urged on by his office, his calling "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."² He could not help it: his message of judgment provoked a sharp push-back, one that included calls for his death. But Jeremiah remained faithful to his calling ... and suffered for it.

Speaking about being Christlike in a situation of conflict is a great challenge, since the temptation is for anyone of us to give in and capitulate to the voices we hear around us, but especially to the voices we hear within us. The alien voices tell us to strike back, to get revenge, to turn the other cheek initially but then after that to slug the opponent "good and proper." Remember: "nice guys finish last!"

Other alien voices may suggest that we retreat, and then retreat again, perhaps to move back or move away, to compromise. "Avoid conflict at any cost!" That may appear Christlike, but it more likely may be little more than cowardice, fear, that causes us to back away when the need of the hour is for us to stand strong and tall, to fight the good fight of faith, to stick to the cause, all the time doing so in a way that manifests Christ and the good things of his Kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit.

After all, the Kingdom of God in the Lord Jesus Christ is a realm of a different order. One does not see this Kingdom with physical eyes, although one clearly detects its presence when the fruit of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is in evidence: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, self-control ... to name a few.

We get several traces of these things in the life and ministry of several key office-bearers in the Old Testament. I would like to look at two figures who appear to act at certain moments in a Christlike way while engaged in conflict. The third

1. This is an adaptation of a speech presented at the Mid-America Reformed Seminary's Alumni Conference (April 2016).

2. Jeremiah 1:10.

example is of conflict that follows because of sinful actions and attitudes on the part of Israel's leaders. Finally, we will take note of several passages that suggest what godly wisdom and holy ways look like in a time of conflict.

1. The rebellions against Moses

1.2. Numbers 12

In Numbers 12 we read of one rebellion against Moses, the man of God. The LORD has a way of moving his focus of redemptive attention to the person that others would not expect. In terms of age, Miriam is clearly the oldest since she was charged with watching what would happen to the Moses "ark" as it floated on the Nile River.³ Moses's brother Aaron is at least three years older than Moses (Exodus 7:7), and he apparently is a man better suited to speaking, if Moses is sincere and honest when he claims that he is not a fluent public speaker.⁴

Yet who is the leader of Israel in the Exodus? Who is the human mediator by whom the LORD chooses to deliver his Torah to Israel? It is Moses. He is empowered and authorized to be the shining face of YHWH to his people. The "others" will likely feel slighted by this choice, and such jealousy will express itself, sometimes in blunt, "in your face" ways, but often in more subtle, less than explicit, ways.

So in Numbers 12 Moses faces dissent from his older siblings, Miriam and Aaron. The mediator (Moses) is opposed by the high priest and the prophetess, and the presenting issue is Moses's wife. There is grumbling, not only among the people themselves in Numbers 11, but such grumbling is now in the very family of the leader of Israel. This "spiritual" objection is a subtle type of coveting, even jealousy. Did YHWH speak only through our brother Moses? After all, both Miriam and Aaron are prophets in their own right.⁵ But in speaking against Moses's authority and God's will in the matter, Miriam and Aaron are in fact speaking against God Himself, and they are acting as Israel frequently acted.⁶ Iain Duguid notes that grumbling may not be listed among the "seven deadly sins," but in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, grumbling against Moses (and against God) ended up being very deadly for thousands.⁷ Grumbling and murmuring are weeds that may start out small, but if left unchecked, they grow very bitter roots.

Then—but also in our times—grumbling is voicing complaints to any and to all who will hear us. This is an easy tactic, one in which the person with whom we may have the complaint is avoided. We do not confront the issue head on, or the person(s) involved, directly. The complainer talks to others to stir them up to be on "our side." This is a not-so-subtle manipulation of power through numbers and noise.

Again, the LORD will have none of it. The text tells us that YHWH heard it. Did this grumbling and muttering actually reach Moses's ears? The question is moot. In any case, it is the LORD who responds in anger. For remember: YHWH is the unseen

3. Exodus 2:4.

4. Exodus 4:10.

5. Exodus 4:16; 15:20; cf. Micah 6:4.

6. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Counted* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1999), 67.

7. Iain M. Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence in the Wilderness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 157.

partner in every conversation, the invisible observer of all that occurs. Miriam (but not Aaron!) is struck with leprosy, such that she becomes white as snow. Moses intercedes for her, she is cured and eventually able to re-enter the camp, and Moses's leadership is vindicated. YHWH shows himself the ultimate "judge and jury" of this situation.

"Envy is a potent source of grumbling in our lives as well," says Duguid.⁸ It is closely linked with coveting, that spiritual look and longing in which we imagine that we would be happier if only God had given to us this or that—if he had given these possessions or that position, granted this salary or that call—and looking in a jaundiced way at those who get the "better things in life or ministry." After all, "I am better than he, and therefore, I deserve a better situation in life than this," we think. This is the self-centered attitude towards life on the part of the complainer who is motivated by envy and coveting.

Duguid again is helpful at this point. He notes that humility and godly contentment are the precise antidotes to envy and complaining.⁹ The Lord Jesus Christ did not come to be served but to serve, even to give his life as a ransom for many from sin. The Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that "what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."¹⁰ Your *servants*, not your leaders. Paul was a leader, it is true, but his constant thought regarding himself was that of a servant, first of all to Christ but also to the people of Christ, the church. Paul could "pull rank," so to speak; he is, after all, an apostle. But he sought to emulate the mind of Christ, being a servant for Christ's sake. In the Old Testament and in the New Testament, "leadership means service." Says Duguid, godly "contentment cures envy-driven grumbling."¹¹

It is in this story about Miriam's and Aaron's complaining that the text records a comment about Moses. Numbers 12:3: "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth." Is this an example of self-congratulations on Moses's part? The Jewish scholar Milgrom notes that the term מֵיָדָבֵר never means "meek."¹² It is used in parallel with the phrase, "who seek the Lord" in Psalm 22:27. That suggests that the term has reference to being devout, trusting. It can also refer to those who are weak and exploited (e.g., Amos 2:7; Isa 11:4). Ideally, those who are weak and exploited turn their eyes to God for help and vindication. They look to YHWH to rectify the situation and so do not resort to unbiblical means to bring the case to a proper resolution. Moses relied upon the LORD for justice, for making things right. In this way Moses exhibits the Spirit of the Christ.

1.3. Numbers 16

The second major instance of "church conflict" that Moses faced was the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16. In the context of this story, the people of

8. Duguid, *Numbers*, 161.

9. Duguid, *Numbers*, 162.

10. 2 Corinthians 4:5.

11. Duguid, *Numbers*, 162.

12. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia / New York: JPS Publication Society, 1990), 94.

God have been sentenced to a total of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. What is more, all those older than 20 years of age (Caleb and Joshua excepted) will die in the wilderness; they will not enter the Promised Land. This turns the next several decades into what one writer called the longest “funeral march” in history. The route to Canaan will be strewn with gravesites, God’s sentence on grumbling and rebellious unbelievers.

But has Israel learned to submit to God’s ways? Not really, not yet. Moses and Aaron seem to move from one crisis right into the next. In Numbers 14 the Israelites have believed the negative report of the 10 tribal spy-leaders. Earlier it was Miriam and Aaron who had called into question the leadership of Moses. Now in these chapters there is the attempt to overthrow Moses and Aaron (and family) as national leader and priestly mediators, respectively. The attempted coup comes from Korah, a Levite himself of the Kohath branch, and from several men of the tribe of Reuben. What is interesting to note is that these two groups were camped near each other by the tabernacle shrine, but it is not clear if that is why they speak out together against Moses. Have the Reubenites felt slighted, being the sons of Jacob’s oldest son?

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram—the leaders of this attempted *coup d’etat*—stir up 250 chiefs from the congregation.¹³ The conspiracy is not small. As a Kohathite, Korah belongs to an important Levite clan. Indeed, Moses and Aaron are Kohathites! The Kohathites are privileged priests who handled the holy things!

The rebels claim that Moses and Aaron have “gone too far!” Moses and Aaron will say the same to them.¹⁴ Korah’s group claims that all Israel is holy. Is there not a grain of truth in this statement? Recall that the LORD said that Israel is a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation.”¹⁵ If God’s people are holy, how is it that Moses and Aaron have exalted themselves over the rest of God’s people?

Moses addresses two groups of rebels. The Korah faction is told to appear before the LORD with fire in their censers, a device that was part of the shrine service. Moses summons the Dathan and Abiram faction, but they refuse to appear. Their complaint is a longstanding one: “You have brought us out of Egypt, not to a Promised Land, but in fact, to kill us!” Their complaint can also be understood: after all, since Israel has turned away from Canaan, now all that the Israelites can see before them is a long period of time, in a hostile environment, ending in their death. “Milk and honey” have been replaced with desert and death.

The LORD shows Himself as righteous Judge, but the intercession of Moses and Aaron also is critical here. How many times does not Moses plead with God to show merciful restraint? Moses does not respond with “payback” but with prayer. God hears the mediator, and he relents from the full display of his wrath! The end of the rebels is dramatic and sobering. Whole households are swallowed up alive into the earth, with no gravestones to mark the site! Plus, the 250 men with censers are consumed by divine fire.¹⁶ Truly God is a consuming fire!

Incredibly, the next day grumbling resumes! (see Numbers 16:41ff.) Now the LORD strikes the grumblers with plague, ending with 14,700 dead. But the plague is stopped by the atonement offered by Aaron.

13. Numbers 16:2.

14. Numbers 16:7.

15. Exodus 19:4-6.

16. Numbers 16:35.

The ultimate proof that God has selected Aaron as (high) priest comes when his staff and his alone, produces buds and bears ripe almonds. A dead staff becomes alive and fruitful, a miraculous sign!

The end result of this story is this: the Holy Spirit grants to Moses and Aaron in this episode a great measure of self-control, such that they do the following: they warn their enemies, but they also pray for them. This is Christlike.

2. Absalom vs. David

In the story of Absalom's rebellion against his own father David, something else of the Christ is outlined for us. But the Holy Spirit is working in a situation of sin and brokenness as well. If God had promised that any Davidide who rebelled would be beaten with the rod of men,¹⁷ that rod comes in the form of the sword that would not depart from David's house. So we have a king hand-picked by YHWH who rules with a wound in his soul and a wound in his own household. David's sins had been most pointedly the sins of adultery and conspiracy to murder. His house is plagued from 2 Samuel 13 onward with sins of sexual passion and violence, followed up with murder and open rebellion against David himself. Whereas Christ Jesus knew no sin, yet great David, Christ's royal ancestor, knew sin in all too many ways, and the consequences in his life and rule are painfully felt.

Amnon rapes his own half-sister Tamar, and he in turn is murdered by Tamar's brother Absalom. The text tells us that when David heard about this, he was angry, but he did not administer any kind of Torah justice in this situation.¹⁸ And here is another point where his inaction almost leads to his undoing.

Absalom gradually climbs back to a position from which he will challenge David. Just as creation itself does not tolerate vacuums, so too in the structures of human life God has ordained the critical reality of *office*: a status where the authorized person in office must exercise the responsibilities and duties of that office or vocation. The office of a king is to promote justice and defend the people placed in his care from all enemies, foreign and domestic. A father in any household has similar, although not precisely the same calling. He must love and lead his household, always being ready to administer discipline to instill in his children a growing awareness of the rules and ways of life, hoping and praying that such children own such rules and ways as their own. In that way, over time they grow up: they become mature adults, able to stand on their own, and thus in turn to lead their own household someday.

The account of Absalom's rebellion is one of the best in terms of narrative style in the Old Testament. The author slows down the account by giving great detail at points, including dialogue detail, but then the action speeds up by way of narrative summary. He carefully raises tension as the success of David's cause hangs in the balance. He breaks tension at points by bringing in various (comic) characters and by drawing several touching scenes from David's flight. David's cause seems in doubt until we come to the (literary) turning point, 2 Samuel 17:14b. Even as David is still in rout, and

17. 2 Samuel 7:14.

18. 2 Samuel 13:21.

the military confrontation has not yet actually occurred, the (“all-knowing”) reader knows the general contours of Absalom’s end: defeat.

To see how this all works out, we should see first some of the reasons why the rebellion arose. One reason is undoubtedly *a fulfillment of Nathan’s judgment pronouncement* in 2 Samuel 12:11, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house I will even take your wives before your eyes, and give *them* to your companion, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun.’” The writer in chapters 13 and 14 virtually leaves David in the background as he sets the stage for Absalom’s rebellion. Literarily, David is moved away from central concern.

A second reason for the rebellion was *Absalom’s assuming the role of Israel’s king*: he stole the hearts of the men of Israel (2 Samuel 15:6). This was, of course, David’s office, but it appears that David was shirking his duties (either due to advancing age or simple neglect). It seems that the king was beginning to assume now a more central role in the administration of justice. Prior to this it was the duty of the blood-avenger to bring justice as the **נָסִיף**. Joab had acted so in killing Abner (treacherously). Did Absalom do the same when he had killed Amnon (also treacherously)? In both cases, David was deeply grieved, but he took no action. David failed in his office; this is almost fatal.

Weingreen points out another reason why Absalom was able “to steal the hearts of the men of Israel” and to raise as large a following as he did. He points to a rabbinic comment in Midrash Tanhuma on *Ki Lišša’* 4 (a statement about Ps 3:2), “(How) can there be salvation for a man who had taken the lamb captive and slew the shepherd and who caused Israel to fall by the sword?”¹⁹ This refers to *David’s sins with Bathsheba and Uriah* (a third reason for the rebellion). It also refers to *the ruthless military policies of David whereby he made Israel great*, but in doing so many people lost their lives. We might note the irony of Absalom’s name, “(My) father is peace.”²⁰ “What is established is that David earned a reputation for ruthlessness in being responsible for the death of many people.”²¹ Some of that bitterness can be heard in the cursing of Shimei, “Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man!... See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood.”²²

Absalom asks for and receives permission to go to Hebron to fulfil a sacrificial vow. Vows were sacred, and they had to be fulfilled. Many commentators have pointed out the fact that Absalom begins his revolt in Hebron, the same city where the men of Judah anointed David king over the house of Judah.²³ It is possible that Hebron had not forgiven David for transferring the capital to Jerusalem from Hebron.²⁴ Ahithophel joins the conspiracy, probably to gain revenge.²⁵ Bathsheba (likely) was Ahithophel’s granddaughter.

19. J. Weingreen, “Rebellion of Absalom,” *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (April 1969): 264.

20. Unless the name is theophoric (i.e., “father” refers to God).

21. Weingreen, “The Rebellion of Absalom,” 265.

22. 2 Samuel 16:7,8; cf. 2 Samuel 8:14b; 1 Chronicles 22:8.

23. 2 Samuel 2:1-4.

24. John J. Davis, *The Birth of a Kingdom: Studies in I-II Samuel and I Kings 1-11* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 156.

25. Cf. 2 Samuel 11:3; 23:34; Davis, 155.

Word comes to David concerning the desertion of Israel (“their hearts are with Absalom”), and David calls for immediate retreat. His servants remain loyal, as do his foreign mercenaries.²⁶ Even the Philistine regiments remain loyal. David wonders why they do not go back and stay with “the king.”²⁷ The text portrays Ittai the Gittite (a Philistine from Goliath’s hometown) as more loyal to David than David’s own son. Many weep as they watch great David retreat to the wilderness. David is back to an earlier point in his career—on the run.²⁸

Another group loyal to David is the “cultic establishment.” The priests and Levites join the flight by bearing the Ark of the Covenant of God. But David sends them back, not because there is a need for them to be spies in Jerusalem, but because David is making an appeal to the heavenly court for the ultimate verdict.²⁹ David’s appeal to YHWH is not a ringing affirmation of confidence based on the promises in 2 Samuel 7, but David does show faith by not being willing to manipulate God by taking the Ark with him.

2 Samuel 16 portrays the ultimate in the humiliation of David. Ziba, the scheming steward of Mephibosheth, deceives David. Next we meet Shimei, a Saulide Benjaminite who bitterly denounces David for all his acts of blood against the house of Saul.³⁰ This scene is comical and pathetic at the same time. David brushes aside Abishai’s call for immediate judgment by appealing once again to the heavenly Judge.³¹ This is very striking to us. David has the authority and the military muscle at his disposal to strike down the vicious Shimei. After all, cursing a king (or any other ruler of God’s people) is a serious crime, a capital crime in fact. Yet David does not summon his legions to fight for him at this moment. Nor is David simply playing a “martyr” role, as if he is the principal actor in some melodrama. He knows that the heavenly court will have the final say, and thus the Spirit of Christ is so in control of David at this point that he does not seek his own vengeance, but he submits his person and his cause to God. The point here is not, “Look at David, a great example of patience and forbearance!” Rather, note how the Spirit of the Christ is controlling David, leading David, allowing him to endure with patience and without complaint the cruel insults of this enemy, all the time knowing that the heavenly Judge will always do right. David exhibits here a strong belief in the sovereignty of God, coupled with a knowledge that God will in the end, whenever that end may come, make all things right. In other words, David puts in the background his prerogatives as king in order to accept the disciplining hand of the LORD.

3. Ten tribes secede from David and his house

26. Hired soldiers? Cf. A. van Selms, “The Armed Forces of Israel under Saul and David,” *Studies on the Books of Samuel* (N.p.: Die Ou Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika, 1960).

27. See 2 Samuel 15:19,21.

28. David M. Gunn, “David and the Gift of the Kingdom (2 Sam 2-4, 9-20, 1 Kings 1-2),” *Semeia* 3 (1975), 22.

29. 2 Samuel 15:25.

30. 2 Samuel 16:5,11.

31. 2 Samuel 16:10.

Rehoboam, Solomon's son and successor, grew up in a royal palace surrounded by wealth and power. The Solomonic reign had started out so smart, building upon Solomon's request for wisdom from YHWH. But the prosperity of the *pax Solomonis* had degenerated into the kind of court where power and prestige came to dominate, and Solomon's rule was outwardly impressive while inwardly rotten. It came to look exactly like the opposite of what a Deuteronomy 17 king and kingdom looked like. Multiplying wives, financial resources, and weaponry comes at its own price. Taxes and hard labor were forced upon Israel, and the burdens imposed on the people were not something they would long endure. Solomon had, in fact, become the very kind of monarch of which Samuel had warned Israel in 1 Samuel 8: "he will take... he will take..." It has been said that in life there are people who are *givers* while there are others who are *takers*. A king who is severed from God's covenant and his Spirit will very likely be the ruler who will take and take again.

Since the rule of the Davidic kings was covenantal, also with Israel herself, when it came time for the new Davidide to covenant with Israel upon the death of Solomon, Rehoboam embodies not the Spirit of the Christ, but he articulates the desires of an idol-worshiper: "Give me what I want, and if you will not give it to me willingly, then I will take it. My rule will be ruthless; it will make the reign of my father Solomon seem like the proverbial 'Sunday school picnic.'" Israelites from the ten tribes are stunned!

The result was secession and schism: ten tribes withdraw from David and as a consequence they withdraw from the Jerusalem Temple, the shrine-home of YHWH. Here is an Old Testament example of conflict in the community of faith where the poisonous source is the leaders themselves. Oppression and heavy-handedness on the part of the Davidic king Rehoboam results in the break in the community. It will not do for anyone to say, "Well, the tribes should have submitted in any case, oppression or no oppression." The loss of the ten tribes is sanctioned by YHWH when his prophet tears up a garment, giving 10 pieces to Jeroboam. Still, this was not the norm: it was an act of divine judgment.

By contrast, the Lord Jesus Christ embodied the office of a YHWH King perfectly. Solomon first sought wisdom, but then he pursued power through many foreign women who enter his court as wives and as concubines. Christ loves only one Bride, his church. Solomon builds a palace next to YHWH's house, a royal house that in some ways rivaled and perhaps outdid the House of the LORD. Christ, the Son of Man, had nowhere to lay his head. Solomon had wealth that got your attention, while Christ appeared to be a Man afflicted by God and forsaken by other human beings.

Wealth and power in all their forms are not evil things, to be sure, but they are understood to be very dangerous instruments that weak and unstable men—sinners—crave to have. In the Kingdom of God, we have to put away worldly ways and sinful methods; we are forever done with clever manipulation of power to get our own way. Our instruments are truth, handled with genuine love: love for God, his Word, and his people. With these things, we press our claim and make known our cause.

4. Wisdom perspectives

There is so much in the wisdom of the Psalms and Proverbs to which we could point in order to see sketched what a Christlike posture and persona look like in times of conflict. We could reflect on the many psalms of lament, in which the righteous sufferers voice their pains and grief, but their audience is not so much other people as it is the LORD himself. The wounds are really felt in the souls (and sometimes even the bodies) of those who suffer. Yet those who scream out their pain and petition do not take sword in hand to strike back. The exercise of violence and revenge is forbidden to us, even if our cause may be right, and we may be the objects of gross injustice. Psalm 7 reminds us that there is a God of justice. Consider also Psalm 34:11-14:

Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it (ESV).

The first lesson is the most basic: learn the fear of the LORD. AS Christ knew the Father and grew in grace and knowledge of his Father, so too our knowledge of God is never complete in this life. In knowing him, we learn to love him, to fear him, to stand in awestruck wonder at him. This is so basic, so fundamental.

The Psalmist asks a rhetorical question about our desire to see many days and see good in those days. He is really asking this: who wishes to live in perfect harmony and fellowship with God in the new creation? Who wants to enjoy God forever? There is a route to such through Jesus Christ. He lived such a life and died our death. The first member of the body to be tamed is the tongue, that small member which is often enflamed by hell and then brings destruction to others around you.³² Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, and such control must be exercised over the tongue, first of all. In the stories we have noted from the Old Testament, how often was the tongue involved—in grumbling, in lies, in half-truths, in disrespect, and in so many other poisonous ways. “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.”

Verse 14 goes on to command us, “Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” One does not only guard the tongue at all times, but the active agenda of life is avoidance of anything that is evil. “Flee immorality,” for example. Positively, we seek *shalom*, wholeness, restoration of all that is broken, shattered, damaged, injured, crushed by sin. We pursue it, we chase it. “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch.”³³ This was Christ’s agenda in his incarnation: to destroy the works of the Devil *and* to build the Kingdom of God. He was obedient unto death, death on the Cross, a death that the Torah reveals is cursed of God.³⁴ He smashed that ancient enemy, death, and became the first-fruits of those who sleep in death. He ascended to the right hand of the Father, and from there he poured out his own life-giving Holy Spirit. That is the power of the Christian church, and that is the way of the church and its ministry, also

32. Cf. James 3:1-12.

33. Isaiah 62:1.

34. Deuteronomy 21:22-23; cf. Galatians 3:13.

in the face of conflict. We are done, once and for all, with worldly ways, because they do not work! Not in the end! We act Christlike in the face of adversity with patience, endurance, and a deeply-rooted confidence that God's Word and his ways are always right. Truth is greater than power. Love is stronger than death. In our office and in our calling we are determined to be faithful to that office and calling. We are resolved as citizens of the heavenly commonwealth to flee from evil, to turn away from underhanded ways, to seek *shalom*, to drive hard after it.

Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know. They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft. But I, when they were sick—I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest. I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning. (Ps. 35:11-14, ESV)

Conclusion

So what have we identified in our selective survey of matters in the Old Testament? Several matters stand out. First of all, in terms of sinful issues that form recurring sources of trouble, we note the following: coveting and an abuse of office. We must make a searching inventory of the closets of our own soul, cleaning out what has poisoned us with very subtle idolatry. Plus, in the performance of our office, we always stand ready and willing to examine our own performance, to abandon what is not helpful or beneficial, especially being ready to accept the faithful admonition and critique of fellow office-bearers, since we are accountable to other office-bearers.

We also note this: the responses of Moses and David to the opposition they faced are not, first of all, moral examples so much as they are types of how the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is working and operating in their lives to enable them to do what, humanly speaking, is most unlikely, indeed, is impossible. Time and time again, one could claim the authority of his office: "I'm the God-appointed office-bearer! You must listen to me! You must submit to me!" Yet Moses and David, for instance, submit the matter to the LORD for his adjudication, in his own way and in his perfect timing. This does not mean abandoning one's responsibility at all. It does not mean ignoring proper channels of appeal and assistance. It does mean putting away all thoughts of revenge and vindictiveness, all desire to destroy the "enemy."

We live in a very broken world. That is what is evident, apparent to the eyes. What is not so evident is what the real source of such brokenness is: sin. Our first parents rebelled against God, and in the day they rebelled by eating the fruit forbidden to them from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they really died. In that death, mankind as a whole became fully guilty (a legal status that is worthy of death) and completely corrupted, absolutely depraved (an experiential status in which rotten fruits are to be expected). Such guilt and corruption are seen also in the instituted church, that wonderful Bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus there will be divisions and disagreements, discord and disunity from time to time in the church for which Christ died. Paul had to rebuke Peter in a public setting; John Mark falls out of favor with the Apostle Paul; Galatian and Corinthian church members have a hard time accepting the apostolic status of Paul; even in the wonderful Philippian church,

Euodia and Synteché have fallen into opposition to each other. To midrash this somewhat, these divisions may have caused some discussions, possibly long ones, at the meeting of the elders, and these cases could well have made it to the level of presbytery or classis, or even beyond. Often in such situations the pastor of the local church becomes the lightning rod, the person who takes the fiery comments, the dirty looks, the cold stares, the personal rejections.

Yet certain things remain true, even in the sharpest moments of conflict and disagreement:

1. God remains fully sovereign. We must believe this. No trial or conflict enters the life of the church without his sovereign will or plan.
2. Your office, your calling, is not a position of power so much as it is place of humble service. The moment you reach for the weaponry of power, not godly teaching and gentle persuasion, you are likely headed for actual defeat, even though you may “win” a skirmish here and there.
3. The Lord Jesus Christ embodied the Torah in all its dimensions, its positive agenda as well as its penalties for all sin. He shouldered the curse so that you and I might be freed from all curse. But he also loved his own until the end. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is one of the commandments upon which the “law and the prophets” depend. In the conflicts in which you may have found yourself, have you loved your neighbor, your enemy, as you love yourself?

Allow me to conclude with a quote from Iain Duguid:³⁵

Unbelief works itself out in grumbling, which leads to judgment and death. Faith works itself out in thanksgiving and intercession, which leads to blessing and hope. Praise God for the gift of his Son, whose death frees us from the consequences of our unbelief. Give thanks for the gift of the Spirit, whose ministry enables us to be intercessors. Live with faith in God, looking to his promises, crying out to him on the basis of them, and grumbling will find no soil in which to take root in your heart.

35. Duguid, *Numbers*, 156. For further reading, see Jay E. Adams, *How to Help People in Conflict: becoming a Biblical peacemaker* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2005); Hans Finzel, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994); G. Lloyd Rediger, *Clergy Killers: guidance for pastors and congregations under attack* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997); Ken Sande. *The Peacemaker: a Biblical guide to resolving personal conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, *Resolving Everyday Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Alexander Strauch, *(If You Bite & Devour One Another: Biblical principles for handling conflict* (Littleton, Colorado: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2011); Ron Susek, *Firestorm: preventing and overcoming church conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and Gordon Talbot, *(The Breakdown of Authority* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976).