



Family Problems

NO PERFECT FAMILIES

DAVID STOOP

(Genesis 25)



How difficult it is for a family that is facing difficult problems. When a family is in pain, the family members hurt deeply. Parents mourn when their older children rebel. Siblings may struggle with rivalry. There are as many types of family problems as there are families. Usually a family embroiled in a problem feels as though they are the only ones who have ever suffered in that way. But even the great families of the Bible had problems.

One of Adam and Eve's sons murdered their other son. Genesis continues to record the histories of several families that also had serious problems. God worked mightily in the lives of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, but that did not exempt those families from having struggles.

Family problems are directly related to the reality of sin—sometimes a specific sin, sometimes sinfulness in general. All families are touched by each individual's inherent sinfulness. While all sin is the same in God's eyes, sins have varying degrees of effect on families: And different families will deal differently with different sins.

So when an ugly problem rears its head in a family, how can the family members discover its source, define it, and deal with it?

DISCOVERING AND DEFINING THE PROBLEM

When there are problems in a family, the natural tendency is to want to define the problem, place the blame, and then try to fix it. How we define the problem will determine whom we will blame, as well as the solutions we will try. For instance, in the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25, the problem could be defined in different ways: the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, Esau's impulsiveness, Jacob's greed, or Isaac and Rebekah's parenting.

Depending on who gets blamed, one

might suggest for a solution that Esau and Jacob learn to get along, or that Esau learn more self-control, or that Jacob practice generosity, or that Rebekah and Isaac improve their parenting skills. Although these proposed solutions might produce some short-term results, the family patterns would probably change very little. A different approach is necessary.

DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM

Looking for the Patterns

Most family problems have to do with patterns that have been occurring over time. For example, the competition between Jacob and Esau was part of a larger pattern that had existed for several generations. Genesis 25:28 says that Isaac loved Esau but Rebekah loved Jacob. This shows a pattern of favoritism in this family.

In the family's previous generation, the same pattern of favoring one child over another occurred with Abraham and Sarah when they favored Isaac and rejected Ishmael (Gen. 21). The family pattern of favoritism would be repeated in Jacob's family as he would favor one of his wives, and then would favor that wife's children. Across four generations of Abraham's family, each generation had a pattern of favoring some family members and rejecting others.

Each family facing difficult problems should dig deeply and be objective in or-

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der to find a pattern that may have been in place for years, perhaps even generations. This part of the process will require honesty and careful self-evaluation, but identifying a pattern is the only way to correctly diagnose and then deal with the problem.

Facing the Truth

After discovering the patterns that have created the current problems, the next step is a willingness to face the truth. When families are not willing to acknowledge the patterns that are causing problems, those patterns will only continue. Sometimes it is necessary to find an objective, trustworthy person from outside the family who can explore the family patterns. In the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph was the one who finally spoke the truth to his brothers (Gen. 45). The pattern of favoritism and sibling rivalry had resulted in the brothers actually selling another brother into slavery to get rid of him. The brothers may have done evil, but God turned it around for good. Joseph said, "God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (Gen. 45:7).

Changing Family Patterns Through Forgiveness

Discovering long-standing patterns in a family can be discouraging. It may seem that nothing can be done to change the pattern. But a family can do the same thing that God does with each person's past—they can forgive. That means canceling the emotional debts that are owed us (Col. 2:13, 14). Forgiveness may take some time. Family members may need to look at some difficult and painful family patterns many times to be sure that they know what they are forgiving.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting or excusing the sin. Nor does it mean that reconciliation will follow. Even when for-

giveness is one-sided, it can be very healthy for the one forgiving. Reconciliation, however, requires action on the part of both the forgiver and the offender. If Joseph's brothers had refused to accept his forgiveness and resume the relationship, then Joseph's forgiving them would not have led to reconciliation. Joseph could forgive because he understood that God had taken his brothers' evil actions and used them to further His purpose.

Forgiveness and reconciliation can break the longstanding patterns in a family. To deal with family problems, family members need to pray for guidance to see the *real* problem, face the truth of their own responsibility in the problem, and seek God's help in making needed changes. Giving and accepting forgiveness and resolving to change can begin the healing that God desires for us and our families.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of family problems include:

- > Genesis 37:1-11
- > Deuteronomy 6:1-25
- > Proverbs 22:6
- > Ephesians 6:1-4

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on family problems at Genesis 37:3 on page 58. See also the personality profile of the families of Abraham to Joseph on page 37.

THE FAMILIES OF ISHMAEL AND ISAAC

¹²Now this is the genealogy of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maidservant, bore to Abraham. ¹³And these were the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: The firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; then Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ¹⁴Mishma, Dumah, Massa, ¹⁵Hadar,^a Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. ¹⁶These were the sons of Ishmael and these were their names, by their towns and their settlements, twelve princes according to their nations. ¹⁷These were the years of the life of Ishmael: one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸(They dwelt from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt as you go toward

Assyria.) He died in the presence of all his brethren.

¹⁹This is the genealogy of Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham begot Isaac. ²⁰Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah as wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan Aram, the sister of Laban the Syrian. ²¹Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²²But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

²³And the LORD said to her:

"Two nations are in your womb,

25:15 ^aMasoretic Text reads *Hadad*.

PERSONALITY PROFILE



ABRAHAM TO JOSEPH: A BLESSED AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY TREE

(GENESIS 25)

There are no hidden skeletons in Abraham's family closets. Their sins and failures lie bare for the world to see. These people knew God, and sometimes it didn't make much difference in their behavior. From Abraham through Isaac and Jacob to Joseph—every generation was both blessed by God and wracked with sin and deceit.

Abraham failed to wait for the son of promise and bore Ishmael by a slave girl. The resulting enmity haunts his descendants to this day. Isaac and Rebekah lived at odds with each other in their marriage. Their differences led to deceit and pain in the lives of their twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Later, Jacob's favoritism rankled most of his sons. They, in turn, deceived their father into living with years of grief because he thought his favorite son Joseph had been killed. In the pages of Genesis we read of unfair comparisons, favoritism, divided loyalties, competition, greed, and envy.

Yet the patriarchs knew and loved God. Even though they couldn't always live up to their faith, they lived by it. These men had no Bibles to read, no church to attend, no accountability groups. When God spoke, they listened, and they did their best to pass that reverence for God on to their children. They cherished and clung to the promise God made to Abraham. They believed in their bones that God would remain faithful. Did they love God? Certainly. Did they make mistakes in daily living? Who doesn't? Yet God reported their failures to offer us hope: If He kept His promises with them, He will keep them with us.

Today's families are no more perfect—except that we do have God's Word to teach us and people around us to help. The family is the most powerful influence on children's lives. Make your home a place of refuge, love, stability, provision, protection, and learning about God. Then trust God to keep His promises.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about family problems on pages 38, 39. See also the key passage note at Genesis 37:3 on page 58.

THE CHIEFS OF ESAU

⁴⁰And these *were* the names of the chiefs of Esau, according to their families and their places, by their names: Chief Timnah, Chief Alvah,^a Chief Jetheth, ⁴¹Chief Aholibamah, Chief Elah, Chief Pinon, ⁴²Chief Kenaz, Chief Teman, Chief Mibzar, ⁴³Chief Magdiel, and Chief Iram. These *were* the chiefs of Edom, according to their dwelling places in the land of their possession. Esau *was* the father of the Edomites.

JOSEPH DREAMS OF GREATNESS

37 Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. ²This *is* the history of Jacob.

Joseph, *being* seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brothers. And the lad *was* with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father.

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he *was* the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of *many* colors. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

⁵Now Joseph had a dream, and he told *it* to his brothers; and they hated him even more.

⁶So he said to them, "Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: ⁷There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf."

⁸And his brothers said to him, "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

⁹Then he dreamed still another dream and told *it* to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me."

¹⁰So he told *it* to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What *is* this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?" ¹¹And his brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter *in mind*.

JOSEPH SOLD BY HIS BROTHERS

¹²Then his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers feeding *the*

36:40 ^aSpelled *Aliah* in 1 Chronicles 1:51

KEY PASSAGE

SIBLING RIVALRY

(37:3)



Family Problems

No families are exempt from problems. Perhaps the most common family problem is sibling rivalry, which is sometimes exacerbated by parental favoritism.

This happened in Jacob's family. Joseph was the first son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel (Gen. 30:22-24). As such, he quickly became his father's favorite child, leading to family conflict fueled by jealousy. Joseph's brothers despised his favored status, symbolized by his multicolored tunic (Gen. 37:3). When he revealed his dreams to his half brothers, they became even more angry at him (Gen. 37:5-11). Tragically, their jealousy resulted in Joseph being sold as a slave (Gen. 37:28), and Jacob being told that his favorite son was dead (Gen. 37:33).

Favoritism will quickly divide a family and cause problems among children for years to come. Parents must:

- > understand that their children are different and appreciate those differences.
- > love them equally.
- > not overtly show favoritism but be careful to treat them fairly.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about family problems on pages 38, 39. See also the personality profile of the families of Abraham to Joseph on page 37.

Jacob's sons' wives, *were* sixty-six persons in all. ²⁷And the sons of Joseph who were born to him in Egypt *were* two persons. All the persons of the house of Jacob who went to Egypt *were* seventy.

JACOB SETTLES IN GOSHEN

²⁸Then he sent Judah before him to Joseph, to point out before him *the way* to Goshen. And they came to the land of Goshen. ²⁹So Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel; and he presented himself to him, and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while.

³⁰And Israel said to Joseph, "Now let me die, since I have seen your face, because you *are* still alive."

³¹Then Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and say to him, 'My brothers and those of my father's house, who *were* in the land of Canaan, have come to me. ³²And the men *are* shepherds, for their occupation has been to feed livestock; and they have brought their flocks, their herds, and all that they have.' ³³So it shall be, when Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?' ³⁴that you shall say, 'Your servants' occupation has been with livestock from our youth even till now, both *we and also our fathers*,' that you may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."

47 Then Joseph went and told Pharaoh, and said, "My father and my brothers, their flocks and their herds and all that they possess, have come from the land of Canaan; and indeed they *are* in the land of Goshen." ²And he took five men from among his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh. ³Then Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?"

And they said to Pharaoh, "Your servants *are* shepherds, both *we and also our fathers*." ⁴And they said to Pharaoh, "We have come to dwell in the land, because your servants have no pasture for their flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. Now therefore, please let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen."

⁵Then Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, saying, "Your father and your brothers have come to you. ⁶The land of Egypt is before you. Have your father and brothers dwell in the best of the land; let them dwell in the land of Goshen. And if you know *any* competent men among them, then make them chief herdsmen over my livestock."

⁷Then Joseph brought in his father Jacob and set him before Pharaoh; and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. ⁸Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How old *are* you?"

⁹And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my pilgrimage *are* one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage." ¹⁰So Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from before Pharaoh.

¹¹And Joseph situated his father and his brothers, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. ¹²Then Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, according to the number in *their* families.

JOSEPH DEALS WITH THE FAMINE

¹³Now *there was no bread in all the land*; for the famine *was* very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴And Joseph gathered up



SOUL NOTE

Together Again (46:30) Years of pain and deception ended as Joseph and Jacob embraced and wept together. This family had survived intense jealousy, great tragedy, crises, separation, fear, and grief. Yet Joseph understood that God's hand had been on his life, so he was able to forgive his brothers. His willingness to forgive and to leave the past to God made this family reunion a joyous occasion. There is great joy when separated family members can reconcile and reunite. Sometimes it takes a willingness for the family members to forgive one another and move on, trusting God.

Topic: Family Problems

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as fleet of foot as a wild gazelle. ¹⁹So Asahel pursued Abner, and in going he did not turn to the right hand or to the left from following Abner.

²⁰Then Abner looked behind him and said, "Are you Asahel?"

He answered, "I am."

²¹And Abner said to him, "Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and lay hold on one of the young men and take his armor for yourself." But Asahel would not turn aside from following him. ²²So Abner said again to Asahel, "Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I face your brother Joab?" ²³However, he refused to turn aside. Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the blunt end of the spear, so that the spear came out of his back; and he fell down there and died on the spot. So it was that as many as came to the place where Asahel fell down and died, stood still.

²⁴Joab and Abishai also pursued Abner. And the sun was going down when they came to the hill of Ammah, which is before Giah by the road to the Wilderness of Gibcon. ²⁵Now the children of Benjamin gathered together behind Abner and became a unit, and took their stand on top of a hill. ²⁶Then Abner called to Joab and said, "Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the latter end? How long will it be then until you tell the people to return from pursuing their brethren?"

²⁷And Joab said, "As God lives, unless you had spoken, surely then by morning all the people would have given up pursuing their brethren." ²⁸So Joab blew a trumpet; and all the people stood still and did not pursue Israel anymore, nor did they fight anymore. ²⁹Then Abner and his men went on all that night through the plain, crossed over the Jordan,

and went through all Bithron; and they came to Mahanaim.

³⁰So Joab returned from pursuing Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing of David's servants nineteen men and Asahel. ³¹But the servants of David had struck down, of Benjamin and Abner's men, three hundred and sixty men who died. ³²Then they took up Asahel and buried him in his father's tomb, which was in Bethlehem. And Joab and his men went all night, and they came to Hebron at daybreak.

3 Now there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. But David grew stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

SONS OF DAVID

²Sons were born to David in Hebron: His firstborn was Amnon by Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; ³his second, Chileab, by Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite; the third, Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmi, king of Geshur; ⁴the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; ⁵and the sixth, Ithream, by David's wife Eglah. These were born to David in Hebron.

ABNER JOINS FORCES WITH DAVID

⁶Now it was so, while there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, that Abner was strengthening his hold on the house of Saul.

⁷And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. So Ishbosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?"

⁸Then Abner became very angry at the words of Ishbosheth, and said, "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah? Today I show

SOUL NOTE



Wise Up (3:1-5) This list of David's sons by various wives reveals the starting point of many of the family problems David would face. As the various princes would seek attention and position, they would also wreak havoc on the family.

Eventually, one son would rape a half sister, that sister's brother would kill the rapist, others would commit treason against their father and set themselves up as kings. David, it seems, did not discipline his children well (1 Kin. 1:6). Although David ruled the nation wisely, he could have faced less pain if he had used the same wisdom to run his family.

Topic: Family Problems