

Life in family

Psalm 127:3-5 (MSG)

³⁻⁵ Don't you see that children are God's best gift?
the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?
Like a warrior's fistful of arrows
are the children of a vigorous youth.
Oh, how blessed are you parents,
with your quivers full of children!

Is that how you view your children, as a precious gift from God? Some parents view their daughters as little princesses don't they and their sons as little princes. A precious gift indeed. On the other hand, those of you with teenage children are probably wondering if you have a gift receipt so as you can take them back and get an exchange!

In a Sunday School class the children were writing thank you letters to God. One little girl had just had a new baby brother. Her letter read "Dear God, thank you for my new baby brother, he's very sweet but what I asked for was a puppy."

I remember the day when my mom discovered she was pregnant with my youngest sister (there is 18 years between us). My other sister, my brother and I were called into the lounge as mom and dad said they had something to tell us. It was a strange moment because we couldn't work out if the news was good or bad because mom was sitting in an arm chair in tears while dad was sitting on the arm of the chair grinning like a Cheshire cat. They then explained that we would soon be getting a new baby brother or sister. When she arrived she was given the name Natalie, which means 'God's Gift'.

In the Old Testament children are viewed as a sign of God's blessing, God's gift. In Genesis 25 we are told that Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40 years old (Gen 25:20) but 20 years later (Gen 25:26) they still had no children. They had had to come to terms with being childless. But they knew that nothing is impossible for God, after all Isaac was born when his father was 100 years old! (Gen 21:5) and so Isaac prays that Rebekah might become pregnant.

²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.

So children here for Isaac and Rebekah are an answer to prayer, a gift from God. I expect that they were both grinning like Cheshire cats. After 20 years of waiting Rebekah was finally pregnant. At last they would be parents. At last they would be a family. Every expectant parent dreams of what life as a family is going to be like. Oh of course, you know it's going to have its ups and downs but you're certain that the 'ups' will be great and many, the 'downs' you hope will be few and far between.

Isaac and Rebekah probably imagined what life might be like as a family. The joys they would share together, the things they would pass on to their children. When they discovered it was twins they probably imagined how the children would grow up together and they would live as a happy, harmonious family. Little did they know that this was going to be a very difficult family situation. But this started to become obvious even before the babies were born.

It's quite normal for siblings to argue and fight

There were two brothers who got into an argument and they ended up fighting and one brother hit the other and so the other brother picked up a stone and threw it back at his brother who had hit him. Their mum came out and said to them "I'm really disappointed in you two fighting with one another. Especially you throwing a stone" "He hit me" said the boy "so I threw one a stone at him". "Well if he hit you, you should have come to me" said his mum "what good would that do" said the boy "I have a better aim than you".

Brothers tend to argue and fight but in most cases they at least wait until they are born. Jacob and Esau however are fighting one another inside the womb!

²² The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?"

That's got to be some kind of a record for the youngest fighters in history! This sibling rivalry continues and when the twins are born Esau is born first and Jacob we are told is born grasping his brother's heel. I imagine that would have made the birth pretty uncomfortable and already Isaac and Rebekah must have begun to realise that family life was perhaps not going to be everything they had dreamed it would be.

We are not told anything more about the boys' childhood the next thing we are told is:

²⁷ The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents.

However, the problems in this family certainly did not stop there, if anything they got worse. This is a prime example of a dysfunctional family and their story highlights some of the things that cause problems in families.

First of all there is favouritism.

²⁸ Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Straightaway there is a split in the family caused by favouritism. Isaac favours Esau because Esau is a good hunter and Isaac likes to eat game. Rebekah favours Jacob who prefers to stay near the home. This favouritism leads to several other problems and causes a split not only between the two boys but also between Isaac and Rebekah.

It leads to a breakdown of relationships all over the place. There is resentment between the two brothers but the favouritism also drives a wedge between Isaac and Rebekah and also destroys Isaac's relationship with Jacob and Rebekah's relationship with Esau. There is division and they end up acting like two rival camps.

Look at the blessing that Isaac intended to give to Esau:

"Ah, the smell of my son
is like the smell of a field
that the LORD has blessed.

²⁸ May God give you of heaven's dew
and of earth's richness—
an abundance of grain and new wine.

²⁹ May nations serve you
and peoples bow down to you.
**Be lord over your brothers,
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed
and those who bless you be blessed."**

Favouritism is a big problem if it is allowed into a family. Consider the example of Joseph who was the favourite son of his father Jacob who had twelve sons in all. Because Joseph was his favourite he brought him an elaborate coat to wear.

³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented ^[a] robe for him. ⁴ 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.

(Gen 37:3-4)

There are various views on what the coat was like. The Bible doesn't actually tell us what the coat was like other than it was "richly ornamented" (Gen 37:3). One view is that the coat was like those worn by royalty; brightly coloured with long sleeves and a long length coat, whereas the robe of an average person would be plain in colour, short-sleeved and knee length. Anyway, the point is that this coat was clearly different from any of Joseph's brothers' coats and was a clear sign of favouritism which led to the brothers' hatred of Joseph and almost destroyed the family.

Favouritism causes ill feeling and resentment for those who are not favoured. It can make people feel inferior and worthless and people in those circumstances can become very bitter. But actually, it does no good for those who are favoured either. In Joseph's case, it almost led to his death. In fact in the case of Jacob and Esau it almost led to death in the end.

The second thing we see in the story of Jacob and Esau that causes problems in the family is bad role modelling.

First of all we see Isaac having a conversation with Esau.

² Isaac said, "I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death. ³ Now then, get your weapons—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. ⁴ Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die."

We see here the favouritism coming into play as Isaac wants to bless his favourite son, Esau before he dies. But Rebekah overhears them speaking and so plans a deception that will ensure her favourite son gets the blessing instead of Esau.

⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, ⁷ 'Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the LORD before I die.' ⁸ Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: ⁹ Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. ¹⁰ Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies."

¹¹ Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I'm a man with smooth skin. ¹² What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing."

¹³ His mother said to him, "My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me."

¹⁴ So he went and got them and brought them to his mother, and she prepared some tasty food, just the way his father liked it. ¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. ¹⁶ She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. ¹⁷ Then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and the bread she had made.

Quite a deception isn't it? It is not really the behaviour you would expect a parent to model is it? This example of Rebekah's deception is then put on the shoulders of Jacob who deceives his father into thinking he is Esau. It's an atrocious episode of lies and deceit, but of course, this has been modelled to Jacob by his mother.

Often in families you see young people or children copying their parents behaviour.

[clip – Children see, Children do]

What parents do as adults will influence what the children do and the values they grow up with which will shape the men and women they grow up to be.

Another thing we see in Isaac and Rebekah's family is that the family don't seem to be together as a family. They become more and more separated as the story unfolds and Isaac and Rebekah seem to be more intent on dividing the family than they are on uniting it. They invest a lot of time in playing one off against the other but they don't invest time in bringing the family together. Doing things as a family together that will unite them and make them a strong, healthy family.

It is a problem that many families face today in our individualistic society. Few families now eat a meal together regularly. Few families sit down and watch TV together. Few families spend quality time together.

The result of this is highlighted by a survey that was done with a group of teenage girls. They were asked if they felt they could talk to their parents about a serious problem. Just over 4% said yes. The survey also asked what they would turn to in a time of crisis. The most popular answer was music, followed by peers, then TV. Mums came 31st and dads came 48th on the list.

I find that really sad. If you are a parent, how does that make you feel? I'm sure that most of you would like to think that in a time of crisis, your children would come to you. Mums, how does it make you feel that in that survey the girls said that there are 30 things that they would turn to before turning to their moms? Dads, how do those results make you feel; being only 48th on the list?

In our relationships with others, if we want to be a support to them in times of crisis, then we have to invest time in them when there is no crisis. We have to invest time in simply being a family, having fun together, nurturing the relationship.

So how can we strengthen a family?

We've looked at things that can damage a family. If we turn all these things around then our families will be much much stronger.

Spend time together, invest in one another, be good role models to your children.

When God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments he gave them these instructions:

⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

(Deut 6:6-7)

It is about investing time, passing these things on, good parenting. A godly upbringing like this leads to godly adults.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to Timothy he writes:

⁵ I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

(2 Tim 1:5)

Obviously Lois and Eunice had invested time in Timothy. They had passed on their faith and the result of that was that Timothy had come to faith in Jesus Christ himself and became a church leader.

There should also be discipline in a family.

¹⁷ Discipline your children, and they will give you peace; they will bring you the delights you desire.

(Proverbs 29:17)

When David was king of Israel and was getting very old, his son Adonijah thought that he should be the next king. But he knew that David's first choice (and in fact God's) was Solomon. So Adonijah made plans to take the throne himself.

⁵ About that time David's son Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith, began boasting, "I will make myself king." So he provided himself with chariots and charioteers and recruited fifty men to run in front of him. ⁶ Now his father, King David, had never disciplined him at any time, even by asking, "Why are you doing that?"

(1 Kings 1)

Notice that Adonijah's behaviour is put down to a lack of parental discipline.

Perhaps one of the greatest family values is that of mutual respect.

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²"Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— ³"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."^[a] ⁴Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

(Eph 6:1-4)

If a family is to be healthy there should be honour on both sides. Children should honour their parents but equally, parents should not take advantage of their children. Remember they are a precious gift from God, look after them.

We'll we've looked at life as a family and some of what the Bible says about families, but the most amazing thing that the Bible tells us about families is that we can be part of God's family. It's an amazing thought isn't it, but it's true.

Listen to these words. John speaking about Jesus says:

¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

(John 1:10-13)

Isn't that incredible that those who believe in Jesus have the right to be called children of God? So what does all this mean; how do we become children of God?

John gives us these words from Jesus in the book of Revelation:

²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.

(Revelation 3:20)

The verse is talking about relationship, about being part of God's family. The painter William Holman Hunt produced a painting on this verse. The most famous copy is in St. Paul's cathedral. On seeing the painting someone once challenged Holman Hunt saying "you've made a mistake". "Have I" asked Holman Hunt, "what's that?" "The door has no handle" came the reply. "oh, that's not a mistake" said Holman Hunt "the door can only be opened from the inside".

You see, the door is the door to your life. Jesus is knocking at that door but he's not into breaking and entering. It's up to you if you answer the door or not but he promises that if you open the door, he will come in and then you have the right to be called a child of God because you are a part of God's family.