

from generation to generation; parents caring for children, mature children caring for parents and grandparents in their old age.

The example of Jesus

It is important that we should consider the teaching and example of our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, with regard to the family, both as a child himself and then during his ministry.

1. Jesus as a child

From the little we are told of the Lord's childhood, it is clear that he fully conformed to the ideal presented in Deuteronomy and Proverbs, as discussed above. Luke informs us that he "grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom" (2:40), and that he "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (v. 52). There is no suggestion that his wisdom was at this stage a Divinely imparted gift; rather we may deduce that it came from diligent study of his Father's Word, as when at the age of twelve he spent three days hearing and questioning the doctors of the Law in Jerusalem (v. 46).

It is somewhat awe-inspiring, and perhaps unfair, to compare this degree of immersion in God's Word with the attitude of the average twelve-year-old child of Christadelphian parents today. Yet one wonders if such devotion today would be discouraged by parents as excessive or unbalanced. However, when the Lord finally came to his baptism and the beginning of his ministry to Israel, his heavenly Father was able to make the breathtaking affirmation, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). Jesus had absorbed his Father's words to the extent that he was the Word made flesh.

Furthermore, his devotion to his earthly parents, in accordance with the Law, in fact continued to the very last moments of his mortal life, as from the cross he committed his mother to the care of John (Jno. 19:26,27). Here in every way was the perfect example of a godly son.

2. Jesus and children

In order to fulfil the work ordained by his Father, the Lord Jesus had to renounce the blessing of marriage, in effect making himself a eunuch "for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Mt. 19:12). He was thus unable to have children, as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah: "By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendents?" (53:8, NIV).⁴ Yet the Son of God was in no way aloof from children, but rather encouraged them to come to him: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them" (Mt. 19:14,15). Indeed, they seem to have been attracted to him, for on more than one occasion they seem to have been at hand for the Master to use in teaching his disciples the lesson of humility (cf. Mt. 18:1-6; Mk. 9:33-37).

In every way our Lord endorsed and supported the concept of the family as laid down by the Law of God, and so left us with a flawless exposition of the purpose of family life, to "seek a godly seed".

4. Nevertheless the saints who are 'in Christ' themselves comprise his descendents, for "when Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed" (Isa. 53:10), and "A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation" (Ps. 22:30).

Fractured families in Genesis

The book of Genesis—the so-called 'seedbed' of the Bible—has many examples of family life, perhaps the most of any Biblical book. Mark Vincent (Stirling, UK) examines some of the lessons that arise from these sometimes disturbing cameos.

THE FIRST Biblical example of family life is not at all optimistic. In fact, it could scarcely be more pessimistic, culminating as it does in the murder of one brother by another. The estrangement of Cain that ensues does nothing

to make things any easier for the grieving parents, effectively bereaved of both of their sons in one day. Although God 'puts' or 'appoints' (the meaning of Seth, see margin) another son instead of Abel (Gen. 4:25), the scars of their horrific family tragedy would never have departed from Adam and Eve.

Why does it have to begin this way? Why does the Biblical picture of family life have to start like *this*? And what does it mean for Eve to

have named her first-born Cain, with the implicit corollary that in some sense *this* (this tragedy, this sorrow) is what she has 'gotten' (the meaning of Cain) from the Lord (v. 1)?

In terms of the opening pattern and message of Genesis 1–11, it tells us that man's demise is quick. From the first sin in chapter 3 we proceed almost directly to murder, and not just any murder, but the murder of a brother. Man's behaviour as a sinner descends from bad to worse. Degeneration into ever-increasing depths of sin is where human nature naturally inclines.

But in terms of family life in particular, it tells us that our naïve expectations can easily be dashed, and that family life can shake and potentially devastate our lives. We have no automatic passport or right to a happy and well-adjusted family, and the more we learn about other people's families (not to say our own!), the more we find that for most there are skeletons in the closet, and sometimes deep fractures, sadness, and many an imperfection.

Living life within a family, whilst very much part of God's purpose and design for the majority, can bring great heart-searching as well as immense joy. There is probably no other aspect of life that gives such potential for pleasure and pain. And the reason is *because we care*. We care what happens to our children, our siblings and our parents. We love them so much, yet we are frustrated by their humanity, often so much more evident to us than our own!

Family problems and problem families

If we continue working our way through Genesis we find that, whilst not descending to murder, most of the families we meet in the book have their share of dysfunction and pain. Consider the following list:

- The way Lamech treats his wives, summoning them to listen to his vain boasting, and treating them as sounding-boards for his ego
- Unspiritual liaisons between families before the Flood
- Ham's disloyalty to his father, and the curse this called forth; the tension between the differing behaviours of Noah's sons
- The resentment and bad-feeling between Ishmael/Hagar and Isaac/Sarah and the pain this caused Abraham; the breakdown of the family that followed
- The breakdown of normal family relationships in Sodom

- The separation of Lot's daughters and his sons-in-law, and the new family relationships caused by Lot's union with his daughters
- The favouritism of Isaac and Rebekah towards Esau and Jacob respectively
- Jacob's manipulation of Esau to obtain the birthright, and his disregard for his family position and responsibility
- Rebekah and Jacob's deception of Isaac and the taking of the blessing; the family split through Jacob's flight to Laban
- Tangled and uncomfortable wider family relationships between Jacob and Laban; the unhappy departure of Laban's daughters from him
- Tension between Jacob's wives (did this affect the sons?)
- Favouritism for Joseph (and then Benjamin); the selling of Joseph into slavery, and another severed family
- Judah's rejection of his family responsibilities as he too departs, and afterwards fails to ensure that God's commands are carried out with respect to his daughter-in-law, with whom he then has a child
- Reuben's liaison with his father's concubine.

The catalogue is formidable. In virtually every episode to which we turn there are problems and grief to be found within the family unit that offset the love and joy that would also have been felt. The theme is pervasive in this book of beginnings. Family life does not begin well.

Why such problems?

So again the question, *Why?* If the joys of family are so great (as they unquestionably are), why leave the account so apparently unbalanced? Perhaps the following expansion of our original observations about Cain and Abel may help:

- Human beings are exactly that: *human*. They behave imperfectly, they act irresponsibly, they inflict pain. Nowhere are the warts as well as the potential beauty of character more acutely seen than in family life. If the Biblical perspective of human nature and sin is correct (as we most certainly believe), then what else would one expect?
- There is, indeed, a significant element of expectation-setting. When we approach family life we must leave the rose-tints behind. Whenever we look at families, we are going to see something of the perversity of the human heart. But this does not mean that family life is not worthwhile, or that we should not make

the effort. It simply means that close human interactions will be difficult and that they will require considerable effort, which even then, because of the existence of free will, may or may not be rewarded as we expect or hope.

- Despite all this, huge imperfections in family life and in human behaviour at large do not nullify our ability to pass on to our children the ways of God. This Jacob did to his children despite the partiality he showed. This Abraham did, despite the sadness of Ishmael's departure. God knew, in fact, that he would command his children after him in the ways of God (18:19). So we must not see these incidents as insurmountable barriers to fellowship and to spiritual responsibility.
- In fact, the inherent power of these incidents to touch our hearts (because we can imagine and enter into the distress they cause) enables us to resolve to try to do better; to be more even-handed, more forgiving, more alert to our responsibilities, and treasuring them. There is in this family dysfunction in Genesis a significant driving force for us to do better.

And most important of all is the following—so important that it needs to be developed in the space we have left.

The most important lesson

These conflicts heighten the value of unalloyed *love* and *forgiveness*, and the power and delight of *unity* and *fellowship*, whether it be unspoiled or whether it be restored. And they do this, critically, both on the level of the natural family and on the level of the spiritual. They teach us what true fellowship really means, and that often the full depth of what fellowship enables can only be experienced and fully appreciated when the converse has first been known. In this sense, then, we may pray to God that the lessons of Genesis may suffice, so that we do not have to experience that level of heartache in our own families, and may truly value the blessings that we have.

Reconciliation and *fellowship restored* is one of Genesis' key themes, and it arises out of all the shortcomings we have had cause to list. We can see it in some lesser examples (as Jacob and Laban resolve their differences and make a covenant, or as Judah re-enters the family and in many ways becomes its leader in Joseph's absence), but we see it particularly in two key events, two of the most memorable of the book:

- 1 **The reconciliation of Jacob and Esau.** This fateful meeting in Genesis 32–33, so dreaded

by Jacob, is central to the book and one of its longest single-narrative episodes (by the reckoning of some, only the Flood account is longer). As the family is split and Jacob leaves, the sun sets (the narrative literally says so), and Jacob must learn the lessons of the course he has set. But, as he returns to the Land and meets his brother, the sun rises once more. In his struggle with Esau, and in the family tension of which he has been such a significant contributor, Jacob recognises that he has been struggling with God. Only when there is reconciliation can there be peace, and only then can Jacob return to dwell in the Promised Land once again. Here is massive emphasis on the Divine principle of unity and harmony between brethren.

- 2 The other classic reconciliation is the one between Joseph and his brethren. Joseph cannot hold himself back. Once he has to go apart into his chamber to weep and to compose himself. The second time he breaks down he can control himself no longer. "Cause every man to go out from me", he cries, as he makes himself known to his brethren. Who has not been moved by the power of this forgiveness and the joy of fellowship restored? The brothers themselves cannot quite believe the unqualified nature of Joseph's forgiveness, and it is some time before they are fully trusting of it. But its power and extent stands as a monument.

In the former episode there is an even bigger surprise. For the one who forgives and who enables reconciliation is none other than Esau! Though in many aspects of life and in much subsequent Biblical history Esau and his descendants are forces for evil, in this episode Esau is to be thoroughly applauded.

The measure of his forgiveness, and the extent to which we should try to attain it in our strivings for reconciliation and unity in our own families, is seen in the fact that the Lord Jesus himself builds his description of the Father in the parable of the prodigal upon the response of Esau in this passage. It is a staggering fact, and one which is fitting as a conclusion to this brief survey:

"And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept" (33:4);

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Lk. 15:20).