

Family feuds: Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11

## **Jacob and Esau are identified by their relationship with each other.**

by [Verity A. Jones](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

My two sisters are instruments of God's grace—God's unconditional, steadfast love. No matter how far I travel, no matter how old I become, or whether they die before I die, I will never be free of my sisters. They are intricately woven into the fabric of my being. My own identity is wrapped up in theirs.

I believe that my sisters help me understand the gift of grace we receive from God, and that God loves us much as my sisters and I love each other. I am never free of God either. No matter how far I wander, God is always searching for me. My identity is intricately tied to who God is, and I come to know myself as I come to know God.

When I was growing up, I shared in the sibling conflicts—name-calling, competition, tears. Yet my sisters and I enjoyed a relationship of deep trust. No matter what controversies or disagreements arose, we knew that our bond could not be broken. We are our most loyal allies, our best fans, our staunchest defenders. We thank our parents for teaching us the blessings of having siblings.

But I am not naïve. Not all sibling relationships are instruments of God's grace. I am a pastor, after all, and I have watched many brothers and sisters hurt each other. I have ministered to wounds still open years after vicious battles. And even when relationships among brothers and sisters have created many blessings, relationships may go awry and cause unbearable pain. When love and care are abused or withheld, the damage can crush the spirit.

In the movie *K-Pax*, the main character Prot seems content and happy. He's intelligent. He has a gift for helping people. But he claims to come from another planet, K-Pax, where families do not exist. Families of origin are never identified, he says, and the community raises the children. The citizens of K-Pax never marry nor connect with their kin. Prot suggests to his psychiatrist that this is good, for on the

planet K-Pax there is no conflict. No pain. No strife. Everyone is content and happy. His psychiatrist, however, wisely concludes that Prot is a human being who has experienced an event so traumatic, so unbearable that the only way he could cope with it was to create another identity, one free from human relatedness. In Prot's case, he even frees himself from membership on Planet Earth.

Like Prot, Jacob is fleeing his family. The strife between him and Esau is so severe that they cannot live together. The conflict begins even before they are born, when Rebekah reports that the twins inside her womb are tearing each other apart. An oracle tells her they will always be at odds. Jacob, the younger, has hold of Esau's heel when the two are born, as if he were already trying to usurp Esau's position. The account of their birth gives no definitive clue as to why the two suffer sibling conflict all their lives. But suffer they do. Esau loses his birthright to the sly Jacob; Jacob flees the wrath of Esau.

Norman J. Cohen suggests that reconciliation between Jacob and Esau is possible because they are part of each other's identity. They are like two halves of a whole, and each needs what the other has. Esau needs the patience and forethought of Jacob, while Jacob needs the position and strength of Esau. Each is identified by his relationship with the other. They can never escape their bond.

How does scripture address the brokenness in our relations with family? Even though vicious sibling rivalry is not a given, the possibility of it haunts our lives and our hopes for joy and blessing. This is our potential for sin, Paul says. In Romans 8, however, there is good news. Paul explains that the flesh cannot have the last word about us if we walk in the spirit of Christ. If we put sibling conflict into the category of "sin in the flesh," then it is a sin from which "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set [us] free." When Paul speaks of "sin in the flesh," he's referring to that capacity in all human life to turn from God. He is speaking of those ways in which human life is so mired in sin that it is unable on its own steam to set things right and be reconciled fully with God. The kind of sibling conflict that crushes the spirit and leaves battle wounds can be healed, Paul would say, in "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." For it has set us free from all that destroys and kills.

It may be in the flesh itself, in the interweaving of identity among siblings, that the potential for being instruments of God's grace resides. For it is in our very being, created in God's image, to reflect the divine grace of God in our relationships. However, we need the freedom Christ offers to heal the injuries and embrace the

profound connectedness of our sibling relationships and all relationships. Without the grace of Christ, who makes God's reconciliation a reality despite human sin, the devastation of relationships might get the best of us.

When I minister to parishioners who have been hurt by familial conflict, I find myself saying, "God makes a way where there is no way." No matter how far we travel, no matter how old we get, no matter if we die, God will search for us and offer us freedom from all that would destroy and kill us.