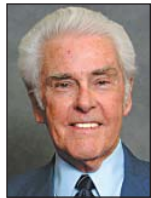


Redeemed from broken relationships

It was almost time for worship to begin in the local Baptist church. The church was a typical small town church with a center aisle dividing the congregation into two groups facing the pulpit. Two brothers, whom we shall call Bill and Joe, were long-term members of the church.



John Howell

Bill came in first and sat on the east side of the aisle. Joe also came in but sat on the west side of the aisle. Then a very strange thing happened. Because the congregation had become participants in an ongoing conflict between Bill and Joe, they also chose to sit on the same sides of the church that Bill and Joe chose.

Under the direction of the church music director, both segments of the congregation rose to sing, "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive":

*Forgive our sins as we forgive,
You taught us, Lord, to pray;
But you alone can grant us grace
to live the words we say;
How can our pardon reach
and bless the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs
and will not let old bitterness depart?
Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
and bid resentment cease;
then bound to all in bonds of love,
our lives will spread your peace.*

It would be wonderful to testify that Bill and Joe were redeemed from broken relationships, but my acquaintance with the church does not permit that conclusion. They were not willing to hear God's Word speak to their conflict: "be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). Since the main part of the church did not help them practice Christian grace to heal the disagreement, the church also needed repentance and rededication.

Anger over past evil experiences led to a broken relationship for brothers Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27:41). In the family of Isaac, Jacob was the darling of his mother Rebekah while Esau was Isaac's favorite son. As Isaac was nearing death, he called for Esau to get his bow

and arrows, go out into the open country and kill game that could be made into a savory meal for him before he died. Esau did as his father requested.

But Rebekah overheard this conversation and set up a scheme for Jacob to do the same thing "under her direction." She told Jacob, "Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you." She prepared the food from goats they had in their pens, and then used the goat skins to disguise Jacob's smooth arms, and sent him to Isaac with the food. Fooled by the deception, Isaac gave to his second son Jacob the blessing due to Esau as the firstborn. So Esau was cheated. By Hebrew tradition, once Isaac blessed the deceiving Jacob, the blessing could not be taken back and given to Esau.

When Esau came in with his father's food, he found out what Jacob had done. So "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him." He determined that when Isaac died and Esau fulfilled the mourning rituals, he would kill Jacob. This sets the stage for the antagonism between the brothers.

Displaying humility can establish redeemed relationships (Genesis 33:1-4). Almost 20 years had passed since Jacob and Esau had seen each other and Esau was determined to kill his brother. God had dealt with Jacob in life-changing ways over those years. In chapter 32, Jacob makes preparation to meet with Esau as a result of his own change of heart.

Then Jacob "looked up and there was Esau. Coming with his four hundred men." Not knowing what Esau's attitude toward him would be, he divided his wives, children and handmaidens into three groups to be able to save some if Esau attacked him with his four hundred men. "He put the maidservants and their children in front; Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. Then he himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother." Whatever Esau's plan was, "he is won over to a most generous forgiveness by the diplomacy of Jacob" (G. Henton Davies, "Genesis," The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 1,

Bible Studies for Life

April 24, 2016

Scripture: Genesis 27:41; 33:1-11

p. 236).

Whether Esau ever read the Book of Proverbs cannot be known but a couple of verses from the book suggest that his behavior could have been influenced by them. "The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 15:33). A similar instruction declares, "Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 18:22).

Be willing to forgive and move forward (Genesis 33:5-11). After embracing and weeping over the reunion, Esau asked about Jacob's family. Each of the family groups came forward to bow down before Esau. "How well Jacob had schooled them in their submissive role. To see the scene pass before the eyes is entrancing, so vivid and clear is the description" (Davies, p. 236).

Jacob tried to impress his planned gift upon Esau, but at first it was refused because, as Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." But when Jacob said, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God," Esau accepted the gift.

G. Campbell Morgan remarks that "the chief interest of this story, however, is found in Esau's attitude. In him Jacob found no angry man but a brother" ("Genesis," An Exposition of the Whole Bible, p. 26.). As brothers together, their humility toward each other redeemed their relationship.

In answering a question from his disciples, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus called a little child to them and said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:1-4), Humility is redemptive in human relationships.

John Howell is academic dean emeritus at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.