

FEUDING FAMILIES

Obadiah 6-16

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It all probably started when William Anderson “Devil Anse” Hatfield of West Virginia stole a pig from Randolph McCoy of Kentucky. Combine that with competition over mountain timber, and you have what became a world renowned feud between the infamous Hatfields and McCoys – a family feud of hillbilly hilarity.

But it was not a laughing matter.

The 19th century shooting war between the two families left 12 people dead over the years. And it is this image of the Hatfields and the McCoys, feuding with each other, that cemented the image of Appalachia as a place full of hillbillies with guns. On election day in 1882, three of McCoy’s sons fatally shot and stabbed Ellison Hatfield. Devil Anse Hatfield and others got revenge by tying the three McCoys to pawpaw bushes along a riverbank and killing them. The last victim was Ellison Mounts, who was rumored to be the illegitimate son of Ellison Hatfield. He was hanged in Pikeville in 1900 for taking part in a raid that left two McCoys dead.

The feud has so captivated the attention of many that a book was written entitled *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900*. (Waco Herald Tribune, June 8, 2000, p1A)

But the Edomites and the Israelites could give the Hatfields and the McCoys a run for their money. And this feud didn’t start over the stealing of a pig. Rather, it started over the stealing of a birthright.

Obadiah is from the sixth century B.C., but you have to go all the way back to the beginning – to Genesis, to a family feud that existed among the sons of Isaac. The sibling rivalry of Jacob and Esau. That’s because the Edomites, the nation addressed by the prophet Obadiah, were the direct descendants of Esau. And the Israelites were the descendants of Jacob.

They fought in the womb. You remember. Esau emerged first, but Jacob was grabbing at his heel, always trying to reverse the birth order and move ahead of his brother Esau. Jacob was always using trickery or deceit to steal the birthright and the blessing from his brother. On one occasion his brother,

Esau, comes in famished from working in the field. Jacob happens to be at the right place with his Palestinian Pot-Luck Porridge (better known as the Red Stuff).

“Gimme. Gimme some red stuff,” Esau says to his brother Jacob. The red stew. In fact, Genesis 25:30 says that’s where we get the name “Edom,” which means red. The Edomites were named after Esau’s foolish decision to sell his birthright for red stew. To get the one pot of porridge, he sold all the special status and privileges that go to the first born son.

Of course we know later that the stealing of the blessing occurs with Jacob’s deceptive act. Isaac is old and nearly blind. He sends Esau out in the field to prepare the savory dish that he loves. Rebekah listens in and sends her boy into Isaac’s tent in disguise. While Esau is off hunting, Jacob is putting on goat hair, and his mother is fixing goat casserole so that Isaac will think it is some of the wild game of his wild son Esau. Isaac is leery but finally convinced by feeling the hair of his boy’s arm and smelling Esau’s smell (as Jacob was wearing his brother’s cloak). Thus Jacob, once again, steals something very precious from his brother Esau. This time he steals the very blessing of the patriarch. Isaac gives the blessing to Jacob, thinking that he is Esau.

We are told in Genesis 25 that Esau despised Jacob. I am here to tell you that that despising went on from generation to generation, just like the hatred between the Hatfields and the McCoys. Although it seems like Jacob and Esau make up in Genesis 33, we finally learn that this family feud goes on for the next 800 years.

After the Jews, that is, Jacob’s descendants, were released from Egypt following 400 years of slavery, they attempted to take the shortest route possible back to their homeland in Canaan. But the Edomites – Esau’s Edomites – would not let them pass through their land, would not let them have any food or water according to Numbers 20. In fact, it says the Edomites and Jews were brothers, but the animosity remained even after 400 years.

Fast forward 200 more years. You think the feuding is over now? No. In fact, Saul leads the Israelites against the Edomites in 1 Samuel 14. And David conquers them in 2 Samuel 8.

Fast forward several more centuries. The Edomites join with the Babylonians in the destruction and desecration of the city of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon.

So it was. Back and forth. Blood for blood, like the Hatfields and McCoys, for over 800 years. But there weren’t 12 lives taken in this family feud. There were untold bodies strung across the pages of the text of scripture. Cousins killing cousins.

The book of Obadiah comes from this conflict. God is punishing both the Israelites and the Edomites.

The oddest thing happened when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in the 6th century. Rather than weeping for their brothers' misfortune, the Edomites celebrate and have a party and even help capture the Israelites and turn them in to the Babylonians. They help knock down the walls of the temple.

The prophecy that Obadiah brings is a graphic description of the judgment that God will visit upon the people of Edom.

Verses 10-11.

Because of your violence to your brother Jacob,
you will be covered with shame; you will be cut off forever.
On the day that you stood aloof,
on the day that strangers carried off his wealth
and foreigners entered his gates
and cast lots for Jerusalem,
you, too, were as one of them.

In other words, instead of helping your brother you acted like your brother's enemy, a foreigner.

Verse 12

Do not gloat over your brother's day,
the day of his misfortune.
And do not rejoice over the sons of Judah in the day of their destruction;
Yes, do not boast in the day of their distress.

"Do not gloat at their calamity," (verse 13).

They took joy in the downfall of their enemy.

It's hard, isn't it, not to want to see your competitor fall? It must be the most evil of evils – when we take joy in someone else's calamity or downfall.

There is a little bit of Edomite in all of us. Somebody you despise gets cut from the football team. What do you do, student? Do you grin, just a little bit, inside?

She really thinks she's somebody; she struts around the campus. She doesn't make the cheerleading squad. In fact, you watch her slip and fall during tryouts. Do you take just a little joy in her downfall?

He drives a prestigious car and brags about the money he makes all the time. You find out later his company has been padding the books, and things aren't as they seem. You're jealous of his money, his power, and his status. Do you take just a little happiness home when you find out he's filing for Chapter 13?

There is just a little bit of Edomite in you and a little bit of Edomite in me. We must be careful and never take joy in the downfall or destruction of someone else.

They fire you. You leave the company, and they place a new manager in charge. When you find out that business has been cut in half because you're gone and he's getting fired (although he had nothing to do with your demise, or even if he did), do you get a little satisfaction in his calamity?

The little book of Obadiah, although it's hard to find and it's a Bible Driller's nightmare, is not simply about the values and practices of ancient societies. It's true today. No feud is as heated and intensive as a family feud. Brothers go for years without speaking to each other. In fact, most of the ethnic conflicts around the world, from Europe to Asia to Africa to the islands of the Pacific, are senseless family feuds – wars between people who are branches of the same family tree. They share ancestors, sometimes even grandparents.

What hurts you the most? When the one you love so much, the one who is closest to you, does something or says something that hurts you. The one closest hurts the most.

Sisters can rip each other apart with just a glance of an eye or a smirk or a snide comment. Damage that a stranger couldn't do in a year's time can be done with just one sentence, one word that reminds your sister of her shortcomings and her failures. Husbands and wives can talk to each other in ways that are meant to hurt, embarrass, demean, and belittle each other. There are parents who speak to their children more harshly and cruelly than they would speak to a dog. All these hurtful words set into motion resentments and hostilities that last long beyond the moment when they were spoken. Before you know it, lines are drawn in the sand, sides are taken, and the family feud begins.

And like the Hatfields and the McCoys, potshots are taken over the years of hurtful and hateful words.

“So help me, I'll never speak to you again as long as I live.” Slam.

“Don't let the door hit you in the backside.” The retort comes from the wounded family member.

Months go by. And years go by. Sometimes decades go by. The anxiety, the hurt, the resentment, the anger, the bitterness all build. And our hearts that were once soft and warm with love become crusty from swallowing the bitter pills.

The family feud.

Parents do untold damage to their children. “You’ve never been anything but an embarrassment to your mother and me.” “Why don’t you try to be more like your brother?” “You’re so stupid. How many times do I have to tell you?”

And children do it to parents. “When I grow up, I hope I’m not like you.”

How many family businesses do you know that have really ever succeeded where two brothers work together in the same building? Not many, are there? Because there is always pushing and pulling, fighting and feuding, maneuvering and managing for power and prestige, trying to get ahead of one’s sibling.

As a pastor, I can tell you that family hurt and hatred never comes out any more than it does at a wedding. A day that should be filled with so much joy often becomes a day of disaster. The bride-to-be sits in my office and cries because she doesn’t know whom to ask to walk her down the aisle. Her biological father or her stepfather? She’s so afraid of hurting somebody’s feelings. So the pressure sits on her shoulders, resides in her throat like a lump that won’t be swallowed away.

“If he’s invited to the wedding, just don’t send me an invitation,” someone said to another bride. Why they couldn’t set aside their sour relationship for just a day for her is hard to understand. They’re going to try to make her choose a side – pick and choose.

And heaven knows how complicated it gets when you decide who sits where. With all the divorce and division, feuding and fuming, sometimes escorting the family in during the procession can become more amusing than watching high school students play Chinese fire drill at a long red light.

The Edomites and the Israelites carried a grudge that lasted for eight centuries. And, sadly enough, they both end up destroyed. Origen, in the third century A.D., wrote of the Edomites as a people whose name and language had perished from history. What God had told Obadiah in his vision of words came true. They lost everything in order to hold on to an old wound.

I’m happy to say the Hatfields and McCoys didn’t let an ancient feud destroy them. **In fact, a picnic was planned – a family reunion between the descendants of the Hatfields and the McCoys. Two thousand were expected to show up. The only feuding there was going to be in a softball game there between the descendants of Devil Anse Hatfield and Randolph McCoy.**

Bo McCoy, of Waycross, Georgia, is a minister and one of the descendants who organized the reunion weekend between the descendants of the Hatfields and the McCoys. The governors of Kentucky and West Virginia, the representative states, were invited to come to make the official peace. They planned banquets and bus tours to feud sights, bluegrass and gospel music, an arts and crafts festival, and lectures about the feud and how it helped perpetuate stereotypes of the people of Appalachia. (*Waco Tribune-Herald*, June 8, 2000)

By the way, Devil Anse was baptized and died in peace because his sins were washed away in the mountain stream. “I’m the only pastor who baptized the devil,” bragged the pastor at the revival.

It’s over. Done with. And now, instead of breaking bones they are breaking bread.

Every time I saw him, I recoiled. He had a feud with the First Baptist Church. I’m not sure if he was right and we were wrong, or we were right and he was wrong. I wasn’t even here when, many years ago – almost three decades now – the church hurt his feelings, damaged his self-esteem. But I do know that every time I saw him, I could feel the anger and the rage brewing in his bones. In fact, on more than one occasion he was directly confrontational with me, spewing his venomous, revengeful rage that he had for this church upon me.

He worked in a place that made it necessary for me to run into him occasionally. And every time I did, I braced myself for whatever confrontation might be before me – all because of something so old that I had nothing to do with it. But I represented the church – just like the Edomites represented Esau and the Israelites represented Jacob. And by virtue of my position, I was the recipient of his wrath.

Years pass. Eventually, I was in his place of employment again. I saw the back of his head and felt my body begin to go tense. “Hi,” I said, trying to put my best foot forward.

“Hi,” he replied. But this time he actually sounded sincere.

I went on about my business, and when I crossed his path again in the hallway, he called me into an office. “I was carrying a lot of anger for a long time,” he said. “I want to ask you to forgive me.”

The one who had berated, belittled, and confronted me on more than one occasion before, asked me to forgive him. And I could tell he meant it from the bottom of his heart. “Oh,” I said, reaching out to hug him, “I want you to forgive me. I want you to forgive the church for whatever it is that we did to you.”

“Forgiven,” he said.

We didn't share a lot of words. Didn't need to. His countenance was different. His heart was warm. And so was mine.

Forgiven? Forgiven. An embrace, and a decade of damage was erased.

Life is so much easier when you don't try to drag around the baggage of past hurts. Family feuds can leave everybody wounded and walking with a limp.

The well-known passage, 1 Corinthians 13, says

Love is patient, love is kind,
Love is not jealous, love does not brag and is not arrogant,
does not act unbecomingly;
it does not seek its own, is not provoked,
does not take into account a wrong suffered,
does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;
Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never fails.

Keep no record of wrongs. Control your jealousy. Be patient with those in your family who fail you. Don't brag at your good fortune. And never rejoice at the bad fortune of another.

The Hatfields and the McCoys – playing softball together, trading recipes at a reunion. Who would have ever imaged that?

But it can happen. It can happen.