

Where are the heroes?

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[0 : 00] Now, early in the week, if you read my regular emails, you would have seen a request from me for people to send me a photo of themselves in a superhero costume.

Now, I didn't have much high hopes, I have to say. I even toyed with the idea. I was at mine yesterday. There was a Captain America suit hanging on the kid's stand, and I was toying with buying one and coming today with it.

But actually, someone did respond. And so here's a photo of them up on the screen. The person's actually not here today.

Now, I'm not good with superheroes, so I actually had to look this up. I googled them. And guess what? It's legit. There is actually a Catman and Supermouse.

They're actually part of a comic series, all right? Now, I'm not going to give the identity of the person away. If you want to know, you can ask me later, and I'll have to see whether they'll allow me to reveal who he is.

[1 : 05] But for the rest of us, even though you didn't dare to send a photo, I'm sure if I trolled through your Facebook pages, I'll find an incriminating photo or two.

I don't know. Maybe someone dressed as Super Mario or Pikachu. You guys know who you are. But relax. I haven't downloaded any photos, so you'll be safe tonight.

But I think the truth is we all love heroes, don't we? Either being one ourselves, jumping into dicey situations to save the day, or else having someone swoop in to save us from a sticky situation.

And of course, as we grow up, we don't fall for fictitious heroes anymore. We look to real-life heroes. So, for example, some years ago, many Americans saw Barack Obama as their hero, someone who would bring equality to their unjust society.

Or sometimes we look for a life partner to be our hero, to take away our loneliness or rescue us from a troubled life. And we know of churches where they look to their pastors, don't they, as their hero, who will bring peace whenever there's conflict in the church, or who will miraculously arrest declining attendances.

[2 : 28] Well, in our story tonight, something really terrible happens to Dinah. Jacob's only daughter. And as we go through it, I wonder who you think the true hero is.

Keep that question in your mind as we see what happens. So let's look at verse 1. Now, Dinah, the daughter Leah, had born to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land. When Shechem, son of Hamor, the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and raped her.

His heart was drawn to Dinah, daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father, Hamor, Give me this girl as my wife.

Now, these are quite confronting details, aren't they? And the original readers would have surely felt the same. Otherwise, actually, it wouldn't have been recorded here at all.

And we often think that ancient societies are barbaric, and therefore this sort of mistreatment of women was passé. But this is actually not the case here, especially when you see then how Jacob's sons react.

[3 : 33] And as with all gripping tales, we like to see, don't we, who the heroes are and who the villains are. And immediately we think Shechem is the villain.

He definitely can't be the hero because he's taken Dinah and raped her. And he did it because he had the power to. He abused the power that he had as the local ruler's son.

And yet, as we read on, something strange happens. Because immediately after he's done that, Shechem is overcome by affection for her.

We read that his heart was drawn to her, that he loved her and spoke tenderly to her. And then he asks his dad to help him secure a marriage to her. Now, we certainly mustn't excuse Shechem's

actions here, but what we see here are actually redeeming features in Shechem.

Here, it seems, was a man who wasn't intentionally abusive, perhaps, but was simply overcome by lust. But having done something he shouldn't have, he falls for her and now wants to do the right thing.

[4 : 40] He wants to commit to her in marriage. Now, of course, we prefer that he'd done it in the right order, that he would woo her, speak tenderly to her, marry her, and then finally sleep with her.

But still, he's trying to make amends for that. And doing that is better than the alternative, which is just to ditch her. It's like many teenage pregnancies, I think, today, where the boy doesn't have to face up to the consequences of what he's done.

It would be good, wouldn't it, if we had some kind of law that made the father, this young teenage boy, take responsibility for raising the child that he's brought into the world, rather than to leave the teenage mother to face it alone.

Nevertheless, Shechem is clearly wrong in what he did, but he's not the pure villain that we would like to see him as. In fact, we see how he and his dad go to great lengths to marry Dinah.

So, verse 6, Then Shechem's father, Hamor, went out to talk to Jacob. Meanwhile, Jacob's son had come in from the fields as soon as they heard what had happened. They were shocked and furious, because Shechem had done an outrageous thing in Israel by sleeping with Jacob's daughter, a thing that should not have been done.

[5 : 59] But Hamor said to them, Then Shechem said to Dinah's father and brothers, Now, for Hamor to actually negotiate with Jacob, I think it's actually an act of condescension.

He's luring himself to deal with someone who is really just a nomad in the land. And yet, what he's proposing is to unite the two families, to share the land.

Now, we know, of course, that this is against God's will. That's what God has said to Jacob and to Abraham and Isaac. We know that. But for Hamor, who's unaware of God's promises to Jacob, that's not something he's aware of.

As for Shechem, he grovels even lower, offering what is essentially a blank check. Name your price, he says to Jacob and his sons. Make the dowry as great as you like, and I'll pay it.

Now, again, we cringe at this sort of trading of women. But in those days, the price of the dowry was an indication of the value of the bride. And so for Shechem to allow Jacob to name the price was to actually give value to Dinah, to give her honor, and to indicate the great worth that he's actually placed on marrying her.

[7 : 46] So Shechem is definitely not the hero, but he's not the pure villain that we make him out to be either. Well, let's turn now to Jacob's brothers to see their response.

And as I read what they did, I find myself asking how I would have responded instead. No doubt, like they did in verse 7, I would have been filled with grief and fury.

I think it would have been totally justified as well. This was their only sister that was being right. But of course, the thing that really matters is, what do we then do with that grief and fury?

What is the right and proportionate response to this kind of wrong? Now, Dinah's brothers knew right away that they were probably too few in number to be able to overcome Shechem by force, Shechem and his allies.

And so instead, what they do is resort to deceit. It reminds you of shades of Jacob's character, doesn't it? For those of us who have been following the series. And so verse 14, having heard Hamor and Shechem's offer, they say this, we can't do such a thing.

[8 : 54] We can't give our sister to a man who is not circumcised. That will be a disgrace to us. We will enter into an agreement with you on one condition only, that you become like us by circumcising all your males.

Then we will give you our daughters and take your daughters for ourselves. We'll settle among you and become one people with you. But if you will not agree to be circumcised, we'll take our sister and go.

Now in their eagerness to secure Dinah, Hamor and Shechem fall totally for this trick. And not only did they think it was a good idea, they were so keen that they would be the ones to actually persuade the others to get on board.

So look how the story is then told from verse 19. Shechem, the most honoured of all his father's family, lost no time in doing what they said because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter.

Shechem is the one that ends up promoting what will be his undoing. Actually his death. So he goes to the men of the city and says, come on, this would be like a merger of the two households. [10:00] We would have a greater pool of daughters to marry. But if you think about it, Jacob only had one daughter, Dinah, right? So there's not many other daughters unless he's thinking of the daughters of Jacob's servants.

And then they say, well, there'll be more livestock and animals to share as well, which again sounds like a good deal. But even if Jacob was rich, Hamor being the local ruler, being sort of having that city would have been richer than Jacob.

So again, not quite a fair deal, is it? But somehow all the men agreed, possibly because Shechem was so highly favoured and so persuasive. And so verse 24, every male was circumcised, leaving the city vulnerable.

And indeed, three days later, we read, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male.

They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword and took Dinah from Shechem's house and left. The sons of Jacob, and here I think it includes all the other brothers as well now, came upon the dead bodies and looted the city where their sister had been defiled.

[11:12] They seized their flocks and herds and donkeys and everything else of theirs in the city and out in the fields. They carried off all their wealth and all their women and children, taking as plunder everything in the houses.

And so what we're meant to see in this description is a city being defiled in the same way or just as Dinah was.

This is retribution, but as you look at the scale of it, I think you have to conclude that it's certainly an over, a gross overreaction. They looted, they seized everything in the city and out in the fields, and they carried all the women and children, taking them and everything in the houses as plunder.

And so if you think about it, if the original rape and exploitation of Dinah was evil in your sight, that's how bad that was, then what are we to make of this pillaging?

Much, much worse, isn't it? Because innocent men were killed for the sin of one man, Shechem, and innocent women and children were left fatherless, taken into bondage.

[12:23] It's disproportionate, isn't it? In trying to right one wrong, and it's debatable whether even justice was served in that instance, Jacob's sons have created an even worse injustice, haven't they?

Now, in fact, if you read later on in Genesis 49, this very incident is the reason why both Simeon and Levi are left without any land for inheritance. So on the slide in verse 5, Jacob says this, Simeon and Levi are brothers, their swords are weapons of violence.

Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstrung oxen as they pleased. Curse be their anger so fierce and their fury so cruel.

I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel. And this, mind you, is meant to be Jacob's dying blessing for his sons.

I mean, some blessing it was. So again, no, we can't say that Simeon and Levi or even the other brothers were true heroes, even though they may have thought they were, even though what they wanted to do was to defend the honor of their sister Dinah.

[13:38] So not Shechem and not Jacob's sons. But what about Jacob? Could Jacob be our hero? After all, he's been our main protagonist through this whole series, God's chosen one.

Maybe he's our hero. Well, sadly, there's just so little, is there, that we can go on with Jacob in this story. Some of the scholars have actually surmised that had Jacob not settled outside Shechem, then this whole thing would not have happened in the first place.

That is, if Jacob had heard God saying, return to Canaan and had gone straight to Bethel, which is where he met God or God met him, and this is where he actually goes in the next chapter, then none of this would have happened.

Now, for me though, I see Jacob's share of the blame, the blame, actually, in the way that he has been actually a poor husband and father. Dinah was Leah's daughter, if you remember, the wife less favoured by Jacob.

Similarly, Simeon and Levi were actually Leah's son. And don't you find it interesting then that Simeon and Levi actually take things into their own hands without actually bothering to consult with

their father?

[14:53] Isn't it interesting that Jacob, in verse 5, on hearing what happens to Dinah, keeps quiet until his sons come home. He's passive.

He doesn't do a single thing. Contrast that, if you will, with Hamor, who would do anything to help his spoiled son marry Dinah. But where in this story do we see Jacob advocating, defending Dinah? Nowhere. And you have to compare this to his reaction later on, next year when we get to it, when Joseph is taken into captivity and Jacob thinks Joseph is dead.

If you recall, or if you read on, what he does is he tears his clothes and he weeps aloud. A very contrasting reaction, isn't it? And so what we have here is a father that's playing favourites.

Could this explain maybe even why Dinah was out in the first place visiting the women of the land? That's a rather ambiguous phrase I have to say and putting herself at risk.

[15:56] Could she be trying to find belonging and acceptance because there was none at home? That's just a guess. But I think we see in all these actions of the children things that can be traced back I think to the troubled family life that was Jacob's family.

Perhaps he had been an absent father. definitely a father who played favourites. And so while we don't condone what Jacob's sons have done, we can actually see how it's been a result of Jacob's actions.

Some responsibility has to be taken by Jacob. And if you read it, it's only really in verse 30 that we finally hear Jacob speak.

That's right. Jacob has literally kept quiet until the second last verse of this story. And then what does he say?

He says to Simeon and Levi, you have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites. The people living in this land, we are few in number and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.

[17:11] It's not the response we want from Jacob, is it? Especially given his gracious and godly actions from the last chapter. Rather, here we see Jacob back in self-preservation mode.

He's not concerned about the evil that his sons have just done. All he's concerned is about the trouble that it's going to bring him. There is no concern for Dinah or her honor. Instead, it's left to Simeon and Levi to remind Jacob that Dinah was being treated no better than a prostitute.

If only Jacob had done what he ought to do as a father, all this carnage may not have needed to take place in the first place. But as we conclude the story, I want you to just consider one more detail and that is God's silence.

Nowhere in all of this whole chapter does Jacob or his sons acknowledge God's presence or actions. Nor do they seek him or his guidance. silence. And so, in turn, what we have too is God keeping quiet.

It's not that God has left the scene and no longer under control, but he's kept quiet. And this is actually quite a stark detail, isn't it?

[18:29] Because if you look at the story before and you look at the story after, God's presence, God's words is abundant in both those stories. And here we have right in the middle God being silent.

Friends, often we see the world as being divided between good guys and bad guys, don't we? You know, there are the heroes and then there are the villains. And it suits us to do it like that because it's easy, isn't it?

It makes us want to work or follow the heroes and it makes us want to hate the villain. So, for example, in international politics, ISIS is the bad guy, right?

Whereas the Americans are always the good guys. So we think. Closer to home, depending on whether you're left or right, you'll either see employers as villains, you know, who exploit workers, or else, if you're on the right, you think that they're the good guys.

They're always the ones that give people jobs. When on the other hand, some of us would see the unions as the bad guys, always corrupt, taking unions fees and using it for themselves.

[19:38] Or you might think that the unions are the good guys, sticking up for the workers. Even if you look at corporates, we like to divide corporations into the good guys, you know, those who advocate that yes, those who don't exploit third world labor, versus the villains, like coal companies, those people that mine uranium.

And if we come even closer to home, we see the same thing happening in our church sometimes, not our church, but in the church. That whenever there's a conflict, we take sides, right? Either we think the pastor and the leaders are saints and the church members are rebels, or the other way around, the leaders are authoritarian and the members are the ones that are sticking up or standing up for the rights of the weak people.

But I think what this story tells us tonight is what Paul says in Romans, the other reading that we had, that the reality is that there aren't any good guys.

There are only bad guys in different shades. So if you recall that verse 10 to 12 in chapter 3, it says, there is no one righteous, not even one.

There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one. Later on in verse 23, again I'll put the slide, the verse up on the slide, Paul says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[21 : 05] And so really there's no point looking to anyone to be our hero. Instead, what we really need is a savior, someone who can truly save us, not just from our problems and troubles in this life, but actually save us from ourselves, from our sin.

And Paul tells us in verse 24 in that chapter in Romans who that is. That person is Jesus. He goes on to say, all are justified freely, made right before God by his grace, through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

And so to be justified, to be made right with God, something that we heard this morning as well, we all need to be rescued by Jesus, both from the penalty of sin, but also from its power.

And Paul says this is freely available by God's grace for all who put their faith in Jesus. And friends, that is the amazing thing about Jesus' salvation.

Because heroes only come to rescue victims, or they try to. But Jesus comes to save even the bad guys. So, friends, if you are a victim here tonight of sin and abuse, like Diana, then my first thing to say to you is, please turn to Jesus as your Savior.

[22 : 23] Don't turn to anyone else. not because then all your problems will disappear, but because Jesus is the only one that can heal you, that can restore you. He's the only one that can bring honor back to your life, because he gives you his very own honor and glory.

And he brings you into a relationship with the Creator, your Creator, God. But if, on the other hand, you're a duo of sin, someone like Shechem, who has hurt others badly, then there's hope for you as well.

The world, people outside like Jacob's sons, may not forgive you, but God in Christ will. The blood of Jesus washes every sin away and gives you a new start in life.

But what you must do is turn to Christ and repent. But there is hope even for the most evil of person, the worst of sinners, in this world.

But Genesis chapter 34 also, I think, has a word for all of us when we see injustice in this world. Our tendency is to want to see the unjust punished, to see people pay for their crimes.

[23 : 40] And yes, we mustn't be like Jacob, turn a blind eye to evil, but let's not be wannabe heroes either. Because ultimately, as I've said, only Jesus can truly save.

Yes, we should speak up for those who can't speak for themselves, we should support the weak and the vulnerable, but we should also keep pointing people to Jesus as their saviour, and not look to ourselves as theirs.

And we need to do it with humility, because we too need Jesus to save us, don't we? As much as anyone else. And so we must do it with grace, seeking the salvation, both of the victims, which is sort of easy to do, but the harder thing is also to seek the salvation of perpetrators, isn't it?

Nowadays, I see in the media, there's just so much blood letting, isn't it? As people bring sexual crimes to light, and so they should, because it's been hidden for too long, abuse, violence, all that kind of stuff, but also don't detect any hint of grace in how people do it.

There's no sense in which the writer or the person saying it is thinking, there but the grace of God go I. It's always, let's just bash them because they've sinned or they've done the wrong thing.

[25 : 03] So friends, whatever we do, let's not idolize our heroes. And I say this even as we look and there's, you know, there are great saints in God's kingdom, isn't it, in the church.

But let's not put even them on a pedestal because they too are like us. And sooner or later, if we know them well enough, we will see that they will have flaws as well.

So I say don't put your leaders of the church on a pedestal but pray for them that God will guard them from pride and hubris. Yes, respect the leaders of our country but don't ever think that they will solve all our problems in life.

Don't think that, oh, if only that political party which I support come to power, then everything will be alright. Because it won't. No one can do that. Only Jesus.

And so we must keep looking to Jesus because not only that he's the only one that can save, but actually because he's the one that has already saved this world. God's died for us on the cross so that salvation has already come to this world.

[26 : 12] And while God can and will use us to contain evil when we are obedient and live out our lives as disciples of Jesus, ultimately it's only when Jesus returns that all things will be made whole again.

And on that day salvation will come to all those who put their trust in Jesus. Which means actually that the best thing that we can do as a church, as people of God, is to call people to repentance, to bring them to faith in Jesus, because that is the only way they can be saved.

So let's pray. Father, as we look at the deeds of Shechem and Jacob's sons and Jacob, we lament at the fallenness of humanity. We see in our world the result of not just those who do evil, but even those who try to do good and end up making things worse.

Father, forgive us and graciously meet us in your son Jesus. We thank you for what he has done in our world, dying so that all may be redeemed through faith in him.

Give us humility so that we may live as people touched by your grace. Help us to extend the same grace to others as you've shown it to us. Heal and restore those who have been badly hurt by sin and abuse.

[27 : 28] help them to find strength and grace, peace and joy in Christ Jesus. We pray this in the name of Jesus our Saviour and Lord.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.