

Human Sin and God's Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, in most movies and books, there are goodies and baddies, heroes and villains, aren't there? In the old westerns, they made it easy for us. The hero would wear a white hat and the baddie would wear a black hat.

And so in the very old 1971, on the next slide, John Wayne movie, here is John Wayne, the hero in the white hat, and Richard Boone, the villain in the black hat. And I love the title above. It says, the baddies wanted gold, but the goodies gave them lead instead.

You don't get lines like that today. And we like knowing who the hero is in the story because we instinctively want to cheer for them.

We want to see them succeed. We want to be part of their team, as it were. Take the Avengers, for example. We want to be on the Avengers side, not on...

I've forgotten the baddies' name. Thanos' side. That's right. Clearly, I'm a fan. Well, today we come to our last two chapters of Isaac's family line, which is really focused on one of his sons, Jacob.

[1 : 09] And we begin with a rather dark chapter about human sin, where it's hard to find the hero. So at point one in your outlines, verse one in your Bibles.

And because it's a long section, I'm not going to be able to read through each passage and work through each text like we normally do. But verse one, we do read, Now Dinah, the daughter of Leah, had born to Jacob, went out to literally see the daughters of the land.

And so the first character we meet is Dinah. She is Jacob's only daughter. And she seems to act a little bit foolishly, actually.

For unmarried women at the time, you weren't supposed to go out on your own without a chaperone to protect you. What's more, at this stage, God's people were to be separate from the land's people. But our author kind of contrasts the daughter of Jacob with the daughters of the land. And Dinah is leaving God's people, as it were, to go and hang out with the daughters of the land's people.

[2 : 16] In fact, even the Hebrew word for went out suggests impropriety. And so it seems Dinah is not an entirely good character. But let me say absolutely clearly that she does not deserve what happens next.

She does not deserve the horror of verse 2. In verse 2, we learn that Shechem is the prince of the land, and an impulsive one at that.

Notice the list of actions in verse 2, grouped together. He saw, he took, he raped. As prince, he impulsively takes whatever he likes.

And this rape of Dinah is shamefully outrageous. We're told at the end of verse 7 that it's an outrageous thing, something that should not be done.

And it's the same today. It's never permissible. And so already we seem to have in our story the victim and the villain.

[3 : 17] And yet, when we come to verse 3, we're confused because verse 3 tells us that Shechem really does love her.

He even, verse 3, speaks tenderly to her, perhaps even apologizing to her. And in verse 4, he certainly wants to marry her.

Although he asks his dad in a rather impulsive way. And so Shechem is, we're a bit confused. Is he the villain or is he something different? He's certainly not the hero, but he does seem to love her. And in fact, later on in verse 11 and 12, just look down at the bottom of your page there, he writes a blank check to pay the usual bride's price to the family.

He says, verse 11, Let me find favor in your eyes and I will give you whatever you ask, says Shechem. Make the price for the bride and the gift I am to bring as great as you like.

[4 : 25] And I'll pay whatever you ask me. Only give me the young woman as my wife. You see, he writes a blank check, doesn't he? I'll pay whatever you like.

He's genuine about his desire to marry Dinah. And in fact, in verse 19, when the boys say, Oh, well, you have to go get circumcised. Verse 19, he does not hesitate. Which, you know, let's face it, it wouldn't have been a pleasant experience.

And yet he is keen, it seems, to put things right. And so it seems he's not the complete villain we first thought. But he's still definitely not the hero, right?

So maybe the hero is, well, maybe it's Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi. As I come back with me, just to verse 5 and 7. Verse 5, Jacob hears about what happened to Dinah, but does nothing.

And then verse 6, Shechem's father comes to talk with Jacob. But verse 7, Jacob's sons had come in from the fields. And as soon as they heard what had happened, they were shocked and furious.

[5 : 31] Because Shechem had done an outrageous thing in Israel by sleeping with Jacob's daughter. A thing that should not be done. While Jacob says nothing, the sons are rightly shocked and furious, aren't they?

They rightly say this is an outrageous thing. It's not just against Dinah, but against Jacob, who is named Israel, remember?

They said it's an outrageous thing in Israel. And so maybe these brothers are our heroes who want to defend the whole family's honor. And yet, look at what happens when Hamor comes to strike a deal with them.

So verse 8, Hamor says, My son Shechem has his heart set on your daughter. Please give her to him as his wife. Intermarry with us. Give us your daughters and take our daughters for yourselves. You can settle amongst the land. It's open to you. Live in it. Trade in it. Acquire property in it. And then verse 11 and 12, Shechem adds, Yeah, and I'll write you a blank check as well. And then over the page in verse 13, we read, Because their sister Dinah had been defiled, Jacob's sons replied deceitfully as they spoke to Shechem and his father Hamor.

[6 : 52] And so who are the sons now acting like? Who's been the heel grabber, the deceiver all the way through the series? Isn't it their dad, Jacob? On the next slide is a son and his father in 1998.

He wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and be a cop. He wrote down the bottom, When I get bigger, I'm going to be my dad's partner and catch bad guys and burglars. And then 2018, there he is, much bigger.

He can only just fit in the photo there. And following in his father's footsteps. That's kind of nice, isn't it? The son following the father's footsteps. But here in chapter 34, it's not so nice, is it?

Simeon and Levi follow in their father's footsteps of deceitfulness. And so they come up with this plan, this trap. Verse 14 and following.

Earlier, Hamor said that They could become part of his people, intermarry with them and trade with them and so on, Be part of his people.

[8 : 20] But the brothers rightly say, No, no, you need to become part of our people by being circumcised. Circumcision was the mark that God gave his people to set them apart as different.

It reminded them that they were God's people. And so the brothers are saying, Rather than we join you and your gods, You should join us and our God. But of course, they don't really mean it.

It's just a trap, a ruse. Because in verse 25, come down to verse 25, After the men of Shechem are all circumcised, Three days later, while all of them are 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 came upon the dead bodies And looted the city where their sister had been defiled.

They seized their flocks and herds and donkeys And everything else of theirs in the city and out in the fields. They carried off their wealth and all their women and children, Taking as plunder everything in the houses.

[9 : 30] This is not justice, is it? It's vengeance. When Simeon and Levi, they were rightly outraged.

They rightly demanded that Shechemites have got to join them And become part of their people. But they wrongly deceived and wrongly murdered. And they took Dinah.

No, it doesn't say rescued or saved. It's the same word for when Shechem took Dinah. It's hard to know whether Dinah was kept there as a captive, Probably, or whether she had been won over by Shechem's tender talk And perhaps her desire to be with the women of the land.

Either way, she's again taken. And after Simeon and Levi murder all the men, The other brothers act like vultures, don't they? You know, walking over the dead corpses And picking the city clean. Now, while God did sometimes use Israel to judge other nations through war, These two brothers are later cursed for their actions.

[10 : 38] And so on the next slide, Jacob is on his deathbed And he pronounces those blessings which act like prophecies, if you remember, Where God keeps them and they come true. And instead of blessing, notice, Simeon and Levi are cursed.

They are passed over for leadership. Reuben doesn't get it because of what he does later on in chapter 35. And they don't get the leadership. It falls to the next eldest, Judah, which is where King Jesus comes from.

What's more, Levi is scattered amongst Israel as the priests without land of their own. And Simeon's tribe reduces in size and eventually is scattered throughout Israel too.

And so the point is, while they rightly defended Dinah, they wrongly took revenge. And as much as we kind of want them to be our heroes, they aren't.

Nor is Hamel, Shechem's dad, he doesn't even rebuke his son for what he did. And he said, tries to cover it up with a deal. What's more, he persuades all the men to be circumcised of his town by saying, Look, we're going to get all of Jacob's property and wealth anyway.

[11 : 46] It'll be ours. So even he seems to have ulterior motives. But Jacob is worse. I mean, Jacob is the main character of Isaac's story.

He's the one who's furthest from being the hero of the story. When he hears his only daughter is raped, he does and says nothing. If that was your daughter or granddaughter, I've got two daughters.

And I would definitely be doing and saying something. Jacob does nothing. And when Hamel acts on behalf of his son, Jacob does not act on behalf of his daughter.

He stays silent again. So much so that Hamel ends up having to make the deal with Jacob's sons instead of the dad. Jacob is useless.

And when he finally does speak, look what he says right at the end of the chapter. The first time he speaks in the whole chapter in verse 30. And as I read, notice how many times Jacob uses the word me. Verse 30. Then Jacob said 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.

[13 : 00] Literally, it says, I am few in number. And if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.

Who does Jacob care about? Himself. He doesn't really care that his sons have committed genocide. He doesn't really care that his daughter is being raped.

Jacob is pathetic. He wins the worst dad of the year award by miles. In fact, it's actually his sin that has put them in this place to start with.

I remember when Jacob was first fleeing Esau, God appeared to him in that stairway to heaven dream on the next slide. You might remember that picture I showed some weeks ago.

And God made promises to Jacob. And then Jacob made a conditional vow back to God on the next slide. Jacob made a vow. If God does these things, then God will be his God.

[14 : 03] And this place, which was the place of Bethel, will become the house of God. And he'll give back to God a tenth of everything, presumably through sacrifice, by building an altar and so on.

And yet, this is not where he's returned to. We ran out of time last week. So just let me show you, just flick back towards the end of chapter 33. So bottom of page 35, chapter 33, verse 16.

Jacob has just promised Esau that he'll meet him in Seir, which is down in Eden. So verse 16, down the bottom, right at the bottom page. So that day, Esau started on his way back to Seir.

Jacob, however, lied and went to Succoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Succoth.

And after he came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city, not of Bethel, but of Shechem in Canaan, and camped within sight of the city.

[15 : 09] And so on the next slide is a map. Seir is where Edom is, right down the bottom. Jacob came back, and do you remember last week, he wrestled with God at the Jabbok River.

There's a little blue line above the word Jabbok. He comes a bit south, meets Esau, and promises to go down to Edom, to Seir. But he lies and goes north up to Succoth, which is not even in the promised land at this stage.

And then, again, instead of going back to Bethel as he promised God, he does, and he goes across the Jordan River into Canaan to the place of Shechem, where all this mess happened.

The point is, his disobedience has contributed to this mess. If he had kept his word, and God actually told him to come back home and reminded him of Bethel, if he obeyed God, then they wouldn't have ended up in this situation.

So despite being the main character in Isaac's story, Jacob is definitely not the hero of it, is he? In fact, by the end of the chapter, there doesn't seem to be any heroes for us here, does there?

[16:20] Instead, we have a dark chapter that teaches us about humanity's sin. It teaches us that sin is ignoring God. I mean, did you notice that God is not mentioned once in the whole chapter?

Not once. In this chapter, there is no reference to God. But that's sin. Living life without reference to God, it's ignoring him.

And secondly, humanity's sin is shameful. I mean, there's rape, murder, deception. By the end of the reading, we're all left reeling, aren't we? But again, that's sin.

To live without reference to God, to ignore the one who made us, is also shamefully outrageous. Whether it takes the form of deceit, or murder, or something else.

And it's not just shameful, it's also universal, because our search for a hero has been in vain so far, hasn't it? Every time we think, oh, maybe it's this character.

[17:22] Oh no, they sin too. Each character sins in some way. In the world of this chapter, sin is universal. But it's the same in our world too.

I'm sure we haven't acted like Shechem or Simeon. But I suspect we've all been disobedient and deceptive, like Jacob. I mean, we've all certainly lived without reference to God from time to time, haven't we?

As Paul says on the next slide, from Romans 3, There is no one righteous. Not even one. There is no one who does good. Not even one.

I remember a guy would ask people, How are you going today? And if they replied, Good thanks. He quickly whipped back, No you're not. There's no one good. Not even one. I'm not sure that's the evangelistic tactic I would employ with non-Christians, But he got the idea.

And in fact, I know some people from our church deliberately answer that question now, I'm well, thanks. Because they know we're not inherently good. Sin is shameful and universal.

[18:27] And it often has knock-on effects too. Both in our lives and the lives of others. As Simeon and Levi's actions have knock-on effects in their lives, They are later cursed, not blessed.

Jacob's disobedience that landed them in Shechem certainly has knock-on effects for his family, doesn't it? And again, this is true in our lives. While God forgives us of our sins, they can sometimes have knock-on effects.

To use one extreme, when people in prison become Christians, they are forgiven, but they're still in prison. Or just ask families where a parent has, one of the parents has had an affair.

They may be forgiven, but the family still suffers the knock-on effects of their sin, don't they? Or if we speed on the road, we may be forgiven, but we still have to pay the fine.

And that's money we can't spend elsewhere. Or if we consistently complain when the Bible says to do everything without grumbling, we can be forgiven, But we might earn ourselves the reputation of being negative people and find ourselves with few friends.

[19:35] The chapter shows us the darkness of humanity's sin that lives without reference to God. That it's shameful, universal, and has knock-on effects in our lives and the lives of others.

It shows us there are no heroes in our world like there are no heroes in this chapter. Which is all pretty depressing, isn't it? Aren't you glad you came to church this morning?

That's why we really need the next chapter. For here we see the true hero of the story. God, who shows grace. So more briefly, chapter 35, verse 1.

Then God said to Jacob, Jacob, go up to Bethel and settle there and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.

Here God appears to Jacob, takes the initiative to appear to Jacob, and calls him back to Bethel to kind of put things right. Now, I don't know about you, but as I was reading through this passage, if I was Jacob's God, I wouldn't have done that.

[20 : 42] After seeing what happened and what he did, at the very least, I'd tell him off. I'm pretty sure I'd do more. I'd slap him over the head a few times. God does none of that.

God acts so graciously. He takes the initiative to appear to Jacob again and to call him back to himself, to go to Bethel as he vowed to go.

Here is God's grace that has been unrelenting all the way through Jacob's story. God's grace that chose Jacob 10 chapters ago when he was the younger one.

God's grace that promised to be with him and keep him despite Jacob's deception. God's grace that continued to prosper, Jacob. And now here it is again. Despite the mess, God graciously calls him back.

God's grace is unrelenting and amazing. I asked my wife Michelle last night what she found unrelenting in life.

[21 : 41] And as soon as I asked the question, we both looked at each other and said, kids. One of our kids was listening and said, parents. Touché. But the most unrelenting things in life are often negative, like work can sometimes be unrelenting.

Bills, they are unrelenting, aren't they? And sometimes even doctor's appointments. But here is something brilliantly positive. God's unrelenting, amazing grace.

And Jacob makes use of it. You see verse 2? So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, get rid of the foreign gods you have with you and purify yourselves.

Change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress when he was fleeing Esau, and who has been with me wherever I have gone.

So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem. Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them, so that no one pursued them.

[22 : 49] And they all came to Luz, that is Bethel, in the land of Canaan. There he built an altar, and he called that place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

Jacob repents, doesn't he? He gets rid of all the foreign gods in his household, either the gods that Rachel stole from Laban, if you remember that, or perhaps the gods they've taken from Shechem. They purify themselves, that is, they change their clothes, have a wash, change their clothes, give back the earrings, which perhaps were part of the loot, and they left them behind, buried at Shechem.

In other words, they're putting off their old selves, aren't they? They're making use of God's grace by repenting, putting off their old selves, and going to Bethel. And then Jacob finally builds an altar to God, and presumably gives God a tenth of his livestock in sacrifice on the altar, just as he promised to do.

Jacob repents. And by doing so, God protects. Verse 5, Jacob feared the surrounding cities would get retaliation, but God's fear falls on them instead to protect him.

[24 : 03] Because Jacob repents, God graciously protects him from the judgment he deserves. And then God restores Jacob to a right relationship. So verse 8, or verse 9, After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him.

God said to him, Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob, your name will be Israel. So he named him Israel, as he'd already done last week. And God said to him, I am God Almighty, be fruitful and increase in number.

A nation and community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I also give to you. I will give this land to your descendants after you.

Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him. Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him. He poured out a drink offering on it, and also poured oil on it. And Jacob called that place where he had talked with God, at Bethel.

And now if you're having déjà vu, it's okay. There is repetition here. God had already given Jacob the new name, Israel. And God had already made promises to Jacob the first time at Bethel.

[25 : 15] But by repeating them here, God is reestablishing his relationship with Jacob, restoring Jacob, if you like, even though Jacob doesn't deserve it.

In fact, these promises here are actually bigger than the ones the first time at Bethel. They match the ones God made to Abraham right back in chapter 17. This is how God blessed him.

He restores him and gives him the same promises of Abraham. It's God's grace yet again. It's unrelenting. So what does all this mean for us?

Well, we could highlight the dangers of taking vengeance like Simeon and Levi, or the problems of passive parenting like Jacob. And they're two truths that are, well, they're true.

But the bigger lesson seems to be about our sin and God's grace. Firstly, we're to make use of God's grace. For as we're seeing, sin is universal and shameful.

[26 : 15] We too have been disobedient like Jacob, as our second reading said. We too have followed our passions and pleasures. Yeah, but maybe not to the extent of that Shechem and Levi and Simeon.

We've all followed passions and pleasures. And yet God's grace appeared to us in Christ, who went to the cross and took our judgment in our place. And now God's grace gives us another chance to repent.

It caused us to put off the old life, you know, bury the gods, whether they be money or career or health or simply ourselves, to stop following them as gods and to come to the true God, not at Bethel, but in Jesus, believing in Christ.

And those who do are saved or protected from judgment from the eternal death. We deserve and we are restored to a right relationship with God, given every blessing, including life eternal, every spiritual blessing.

But only for us who make use of it, for those who heed God's call to repent, to come back to him by believing in Jesus. So have you done that? Have you come to the true God?

[27 : 31] Have you repented, turned away from your old life and put your trust in Jesus? And for us who have, then we're to continue to make use of God's unrelenting and amazing grace.

Because we keep sinning, don't we? As some verses we often say here at church are the next ones on the slide. It says, if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves. That is, you know, we're having ourselves on because we all sin.

But the second part is, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins. This is what God's grace did for Jacob and continues to do for us.

So keep making use of God's grace. Keep repenting, confessing our sins. We're to keep being like Jacob's family, putting off the old sinful nature and clothing ourselves with Christ's character.

For God's grace will keep forgiving and restoring. And because of this great news, then finally we are to praise God for his grace, not only with his, with our lips, but in our lives.

[28 : 41] I sometimes get tired of having to tell my kids the same thing, you know, unpack your school bags, pick up the clothes off the floor, shut the pantry door, do your homework. It's unrelenting.

And each time they say sorry, they repent, and then they do the right thing eventually. But one time, it was last year, I remember, I was just tired and I just fully lost it.

I said, that's it. I don't care if you're sorry anymore. You're grounded for the rest of the year. Slide over. Reaction. But within seconds, it struck me, or more accurately, God's spirit reminded me, that this is what it must be like for God.

Only worse. Because we keep doing the wrong thing. We keep sinning. And yet God does not lose it with us, does he? He continues to forgive, to show grace, to love.

It's like this kid's prayer I saw on the next slide, where the key wrote, Dear God, I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family, and I can never do it. But God does, doesn't he?

[29 : 51] It's extraordinary. You see, God is the real hero of the whole Jacob story. That's why the series title has been, Jacob, God's sovereign grace.

That's why my sermon titles try to have God in it. That's why the author gives us such a dark chapter in verse 34, to highlight God's grace in chapter 35. After Cynthia read out chapter 34, the usual practice, this is the word of the Lord, and the thanks be to God was, oh, thanks be to God. It was a dark chapter, wasn't it? But the darkness of the chapter is like the black cloth that jewelers use, and put behind a diamond, to make the diamond shine more brilliantly. The dark chapter of 34, makes God's grace shine even more brilliantly.

that we might indeed say wholeheartedly, thanks be to God for his unrelenting amazing grace.

God is the real hero. He's the one who wears the white hat. So see afresh how brilliant he is, that we might cheer, praise him, not only with our lips, but in our lives, and that we might remain part of his team, his family.

[31 : 09] I mean, what other God in the universe, shows us such unrelenting, and amazing grace? None. Let's pray.

Our gracious heavenly father, we are so familiar with your grace, but we thank you for this stark reminder this morning, of just how unrelenting, and amazing it is.

Help us, we pray, to keep praising you, with our mouths, and in our lives, for the God you are, and for your amazing, and unrelenting grace.

We ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.