

The Perils of Peace and Prosperity

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[0 : 0 0] online at tron.church slash membership. So tron.church slash membership, and we'll be starting in two weeks time. So hope to see many of you there. Thank you.

Excellent. Thank you very much, Andy. We're going to turn now to our reading for this evening. If you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of Mr. Bibles at the side and at the back, so please do grab a Bible and turn with me to Genesis and chapter 34.

Genesis 34, and we're reading from verse 1, page 28, if you have one of the visitor Bibles. So Genesis 34 and from verse 1.

Now Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land.

And when Shechem, the son of Hamo the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob.

[1 : 2 1] He loved the young women and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamo and said, get me this girl for my wife. Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah, but his sons were with his livestock in the field. So Jacob held his peace until they came.

And Hamo, the son that the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it. And the men were indignant and very angry because he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter.

For such a thing must not be done. But Hamo spoke with them saying, the soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him and to be his wife.

Make marriages with us. Give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall dwell with us and the land shall be open to you. Dwell and trade in it and get property in it. Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, let me find favor in your eyes and whatever you say to me, I will give. Ask me for a great bride price and gift as you will. And I will give whatever you say to me.

[2 : 4 5] Only give me the young woman to be my wife. The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamo deceitfully because he had defiled their sister Dinah.

They said to him, we cannot do this thing to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we agree with you that you will become as we are by every male among you being circumcised.

Then we will give our daughters to you and we will take your daughters to ourselves and we will dwell with you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and we'll be gone.

Their words pleased Hamo and Hamo's son Shechem. And the young man did not delay to do the thing because he delighted in Jacob's daughter. Now he was the most honoured of all his father's house.

So Hamo and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city saying, These men are at peace with us.

[4 : 0 0] Let them dwell in the land and trade in it. For behold, the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters as wives and let us give them our daughters. But only on this condition will the men agree to dwell with us to become one people.

When every male among us is circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property and all their beasts be ours? Only let us agree with them and they will dwell with us.

And all who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamo and his son Shechem. And every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males. They killed Hamo and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city because they had defiled their sister.

[5 : 15] They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys and whatever was in the city and in the field, all their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered.

Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, You have brought terrible trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household. But they said, Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?

God said to Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the gods who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.

So Jacob said to his household and to all who are with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments.

[6 : 18] Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.

So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem.

And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. Amen.

Well, may God bless his word to us. Amen. Well, do turn with me to the passage you read there, beginning of Genesis chapter 34.

And you may have been thinking, and I wouldn't be surprised if you were, as we read this passage, what on earth is such a horrible, ugly story doing in the Bible?

[7 : 26] I can tell you what I've been thinking about all week. Do I have to really preach on a horrible, ugly story like this? It certainly, for one thing, displays the Bible's honesty, doesn't it?

There's no airbrushing out. There's no censoring the real truth about God's people. No hiding the laptops. No erasing the WhatsApp messages. The Bible is utterly realistic, isn't it, about human life on earth.

It's no fairy story where everything turns out lovely and nice. No, far from it. It's dark, dirty, and it's often very destructive indeed.

But this story, if we look at it and where it comes in the whole of the story of Genesis, it helps to explain a lot of what we're going to find out later on when Genesis comes to its climax.

And probably the best-known stories of Genesis, the story of Jacob's sons, which are all centered around Joseph. And remember, he survives vicious and vengeful treatment by his brothers.

[8 : 33] This family's traits are being shown in advance here, aren't they? And, of course, Jacob survives his brothers, Joseph survives his brothers and becomes the great savior from famine, the great savior from death.

He leads, at last, to the great multiplying of the Israelites in the land of Goshen in Egypt. But this chapter is giving us something of a foretaste, isn't it, of how these brothers operate. And also some of the reasons why.

Because this is a family where there are deep resentments. Not just about Jacob's favoritism of Joseph that we read about later on, but certainly also his lack of apparent care for the offspring of his less favored wives and concubines.

And particularly here in this story, his apparent passivity, when Leah, the daughter, Leah's daughter, Dinah, is treated so badly and dishonored.

And the brothers' disrespect for Jacob, shown at the end here, and their unrestrained behavior, it means, doesn't it, that when we get a bit later on in the story of Jacob and Joseph and all of that, we shouldn't be too surprised.

[9 : 50] And again, furthermore, the context here, right after chapter 33 that we looked at last week, that's important too. About 10 years probably have elapsed since these events, because the children have grown up.

Dinah is now in her mid-teens. The brothers are obviously grown into young men. But the point is, you see, that the threat to this covenant family and to the covenant seed is never abated. We've read through the story already, haven't we, of seeing them facing all kinds of attacks from outside. They faced possible annihilation at the hand of Laban and his army, and then the threat of Esau and his approaching army.

And God rescued them. But now they're back in the land, and they find themselves in a place of peace, a place of prosperity. And it's a very different threat now that God's people are facing. It's a threat of assimilation. It's a threat of being conformed to the image of the culture all around, to be just like the people of Canaan, not just in the land, but of the land.

[11:01] In the words of verse 22 here in chapter 34, do you see, dwelling with them to become one people. That little phrase, with us, and one people, comes again and again through the chapter. It's there in verses 9 and 10. It's there in verse 16. It's there several times in verses 21 to 23. And that is the key to what this is all about. The Israelites are back in the land, but the struggle's not over.

Far from it. Indeed, the perils of peace and prosperity in the life of faith are sometimes more dangerous than the perils of trouble and adversity.

Now just think about who Moses wrote these stories for, first of all. It was the Israelites, wasn't it? About to reenter the land of Canaan themselves.

And they'd endured all kinds of threats along the way on their journeyings. But they were about to go into a land flowing with milk and honey, as God said. And Moses warned them repeatedly, didn't he?

[12:06] About the perils of peace and prosperity that would confront them in the land. Deuteronomy chapter 6. When you eat and are full, then take care that you don't forget the Lord who brought you out of the house of Egypt.

Him you shall serve. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the people all around you. And he warned them there very specifically. In the next chapter, you shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons.

For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods. Exactly this very real and present danger of assimilation.

Assimilation of God's people, whatever age they live in, to become one people with the people of the world all around. That is what this chapter is illustrating for us.

Unequal yoking that leads to disaster. I'm sure when they heard this chapter, first of all, Moses speaking to them or reading it to them, I'm sure the Israelites under Moses thought, well, that would never happen to us, Moses.

[13:19] I suppose that's what we think too, isn't it? That could never happen to us, to my life, to my family, to my church. Do you know, I can think back to when I was a student. It wasn't yesterday.

It's a long time ago now. But I remember being a student in the Christian union, at university, and being told that a very large percentage of those students who were in leadership in the Christian unions, within 10 years of leaving university, would abandon their faith.

And I remember thinking, that will never happen to my generation. And looking back over 10, 20, 30 years, I was wrong.

And I know many who served alongside me zealously for the Lord, who drifted away, not because of necessarily fierce opposition, but just through the pressure of the world to assimilate.

And some of my friends then are now living not just without Christ, but as fierce opponents of the gospel of Christ. Living the very antithesis of the way of Christ. Well, you see, these things are in the Bible, the Apostle Paul says, for our instruction and for our warning.

[14:36] Lest anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. That's what he says to the Corinthians. And we need God's gracious warnings, don't we? But we also need the encouragements that these scriptures give us because that is what also gives us hope.

Hope in the extraordinary mercy of God that persists and that overcomes even in the extraordinary mess that so often, alas, engulfs God's people.

Not just then, but still today. So that's what this story is here for and we need to look at it together. It comes in two parts, really.

First of all, in verses 1 to 12, we have the events surrounding the violation of Jacob's daughter. And then, verses 13 to 31, we have those events surrounding the vengeance of Jacob's sons. And it's a symmetrical structure, a sandwich, as Phil would call it, violent action at the beginning and at the end, and in between, lots of parleying and pact-making.

[15:41] So let's look first in verses 1 to 12, the violation of Jacob's daughter and what it leads to. And it's a story of defiling passion, but one that leads to a far more dangerous proposal.

Verses 1 to 7 describe a shameful passion that brings defilement on the covenant family. And verses 1 to 4 relate a sad, but really rather unsurprising tragedy for the family.

It begins in verse 1 with something that seems very innocent. Dinah, Jacob and Leah's daughter, went out to see the women of the land. But actually, that phrase should set our alarm bells ringing, shouldn't it?

Because we know from this story already that the Canaanite women were a big problem. They repulsed Abraham and Isaac, Jacob's father, and especially their wives.

Do you remember? Abraham's words in chapter 24, not one of these Canaanite women for my son. Because this was a particularly hideous and immoral people.

[16:45] And Isaac and Rebekah, too, were very distressed when Esau got involved with such women. And that was the very reason that Jacob was sent so far away to go and find a wife for himself, not from that place. So this is very bad news already.

This bodes ill. And I think the writer is telling us that Dinah's motives are rather suspect. She's not totally innocent in this. She wants to go out with the cool young women and join in all the things that they're doing.

But it's not so very different, is it, a few thousand years later? She'll be fine. She'll look after herself, she thought. But in the real world, things aren't really that simple, are they?

When you play with fire, it's not going to be long, is it, until you start getting burned. And if you're a pretty teenager like Dinah, well, you won't just go and see, you'll be seen.

And she was, verse 2, she was seen by Shirley, the bloke that all the girls must have thought was the catch of the time, Prince Shechem himself. And then what happens next is just something that does happen so commonly in these situations.

[17:52] Verse 2 reads literally and sharply, he saw her, he took her, he laid her, he shamed her. He conquered her, he took her virginity, which particularly in that culture robbed her of her purity as a bride for any other man.

That's not entirely clear how forcible this was. Some people think it was rape. It could be. The language sometimes can imply that, but it's not necessarily. I think it might be deliberately ambiguous here because Dinah's not portrayed entirely as the innocent in all of this.

But there can be no doubt that Moses does very clearly condemn Shechem for his action. It's a willful, it's a selfish taking in sin.

It's just like Eve, do you remember, who saw and took the forbidden fruit. Just like the tyrants of Genesis chapter 6, who saw and took wives as they chose.

Shechem took advantage of this foolish girl. And verse 7 is unequivocal. It was an outrageous thing in Israel, such things that must not be done.

[19:04] Now that's language that Moses here has understood perfectly. It's a stock phrase used again and again throughout the law. It means a scandalous thing has been done.

It's used of Achan's sin in Joshua chapter 7. It's used of the men of Gibeah's perverse crime in Judges 19. It's used of sexual promiscuity of an unmarried woman in Deuteronomy 22.

So clearly, Shechem is regarded as a responsible party here, whatever Dinah's mixed up emotions might have been. And that's just worth noting, isn't it?

The Bible's not being misogynistic. It's putting the blame fairly on the man here, even though it's telling us it takes two to tango. And yet actually, even Shechem is not totally monstrous, is he?

Look at verse 3. He loves Dinah. He speaks tenderly to her. He's desperate to marry her. She's not just a prostitute to him, actually, as the brothers say.

[20:03] It's more than that. And so he asks his father, the crown prince, to sort it all out. Take this girl for my wife, he says, verse 4. Same verb again.

He might defer to his father, but it's quite clear he doesn't expect no for an answer, does he? What about Dinah's father, verse 5? Well, he hears of this shameful thing, this defilement of his daughter.

And what does he do? Nothing. And he says nothing. We don't know for how long, but strikingly, it's actually the pagan prince, do you see, verse 5, who takes the initiative and comes to him and says, look, we need to do the right thing here.

It's not Jacob taking the initiative, the man of God. And by the way, the penalty for an act like this in the law of Moses, you can read it in Deuteronomy 22, is actually very practical.

Because this girl could now never marry anybody else, the man in question had to marry her. And in this particular case, he was never, ever allowed to divorce her. And he had to compensate the family very heavily.

[21 : 11] You can read it in Deuteronomy 22. Moses here is new that and he understood this very well. So what we're being told here is that the pagan prince, Hamor, is the one who seems to want to do the right thing.

Although you'll notice there's no apology, there's no shame, apparently. But Jacob seems remarkably disinterested. Now John Calvin suggests that he is so grief-stricken that he can't speak. But I'm afraid for once I think John Calvin really does get it wrong here. It's Dinah's brothers, we're told, were full of grief. Verse 7, they were indignant. And that word is only ever used elsewhere of God's grief at human sin.

Genesis 6, verse 6. And they're rightly grieved, rightly angry because an outrage has been committed against Dinah, their sister, and against the whole community. But not Jacob, it seems. In fact, the astonishing thing really here is Jacob's apparent weakness. It's the return of his fearfulness. Verse 30 just expresses that, doesn't it?

[22 : 17] So latitude seems to be one of appeasement and desire just for the quiet life. It's such a contrast, isn't it, to chapter 33, the one that went before. Why is that?

Well, a lot of preachers commonly say, ah, well, you see, Jacob's in the wrong place. Jacob has stopped short of full consecration. Jacob's living in second best. He's living out of God's will because he should have been back in Bethel where he goes to in chapter 35, not Shechem.

That's why all this happened. He was in the wrong place. I find that unpersuasive. I don't think the text is indicating that, really. God's call on Jacob wasn't to go immediately to Bethel.

It was to go back to the land of Canaan. We're told at the end of chapter 33, he went back to the land of Canaan and arrived in peace. And yes, in chapter 35, he does go on to Bethel, but then he goes on from Bethel again.

And God doesn't censure him for that. So we've got to be cautious, I think, to slam Jacob. It's just all happening because he got his geography wrong. And actually, that's an important point because Christians can sometimes ask themselves, well, why am I having such trouble in my life or in my family?

[23 : 29] Maybe I've made a terrible mistake. Maybe I'm in the wrong place. Perhaps I did the wrong job. Perhaps I came to the wrong city. Perhaps I married the wrong person. Maybe I've got out of God's will. That's why everything's going wrong in my life.

And that can cause all kinds of anxiety, can't it? It's very unhelpful to think that way, but the answer is no, that is not the case. You can't inadvertently get yourself out of God's will by having a wrong decision by mistake somewhere.

Of course, it may be that you know that you are deliberately living absolutely in defiance of God's clear commands. Well, that's a different thing altogether, isn't it? But if that's the case, the answer still isn't to blame some past decision that you made and you can't change and it's now just your bed and you've got to lie in it.

No, the answer to that, if you're living disobediently, is to repent now and obey God now. No, it's not that he's made that mistake. But it is possible, isn't it, to just grow weary of the struggle of the life of faith.

to just feel that you want to be done with all these battles of being loyal to Jesus and the gospel. There's a story in 2 Samuel 21 that says there was war again between the Philistines and Israel and David grew weary.

[24 : 53] And David faced constant battles, didn't he? Just like Jacob, just like we do. And it's very tempting, isn't it, to just get to the point where you just want to give up and let go and settle in and settle down to an easier life.

Not being the outsider any longer, not being the odd one out, not being the different one in your school or your college class or your office or on your wider family.

I don't know, maybe that was Jacob here. I think we have to admit that at least in his attitude here, Jacob is being rebuked by the writer.

Both in his laxity, I think allowing his daughter to dabble in the pagan culture that was obviously so dangerous. And then also in his apparent lack of concern and his lack of action after what happened.

And I think there's a sobering word there, isn't there, for Christian fathers? We're to be godly guardians, aren't we, of our children? And we need to see the danger of just saying, oh well, let them see for themselves, let them find their own way in the culture of the world round about.

[26 : 03] No, no, no, no. It's our responsibility, isn't it, as parents, by prayer and by precept and by example to teach our children how to be in the world but not of the world.

not hermetically sealed away, hidden away from the realities of life, of course not, but training them not to be conformed to the ways of the world with all the dangers that the world brings to young lives and to young faith.

Well, whatever is behind it all, it's a story of defiling passion. But it leads to a very dangerous proposal. Look at verses 8 to 12, you see, they speak of a seductive proposal that brings great danger to the whole church.

Hamor's words in verse 8 are polite, they're respectful, please give your daughter to be my son's wife, but you see, it's not quite so innocent. Remember, verse 26 later on tells us that they've got Dinah actually hostage in their house.

whether she's happy to be there or not, we're not told. And Shechem wants her and he's infatuated with her, verse 11 and 12, he says, oh, I'll give you anything you like for her.

[27 : 20] But his father Hamor, notice, he's got a bigger prize in view, hasn't he? And that actually is where the real danger is. Look at verses 9 and 10. Do you see, his proposal is one of full assimilation.

Make your marriages with us widespread, not just this one. Dwell with us, he says, and we'll make the land open to you to dwell and to get property. That word, they possess property in verse 10 is very significant.

That's the same language as God gave in his promise to Abraham. This land will be your property, your possession. And here's an offer to Jacob and his family for everything that God had promised, but from the hand of a seductive prince at the mere price of just forgetting that you've got to be a distinctive people.

All you need to do is ignore what God said. Did God really say that anyway? Be at peace with us. Dwell with us. Become one people with us.

Look at verse 16. One people. Verse 21 and 22 in verse 23. You see, that's what reveals the truth of all of this so very clearly. Now, do you recognize that seductive voice?

[28 : 38] It's the voice of the serpent. Genesis 3. I'll give you everything that God's promised so much more easily. Come and be at one with us.

Or again, much later on in Matthew chapter 4. I will give you all these kingdoms of the world, Jesus. All you have to do is bow down and worship me. Be at peace with me.

Give up the struggle and the war. Come and live with me. And that's the same voice, isn't it, that says things like that to you and me all the time.

No need to keep up the struggle. Be like everyone else. Just join in. That's the way to peace. That's the way to fulfillment. That's the way to find your true identity. See? It's a siren voice to the church always.

Come on, you need to fit in with the 21st century world if you don't want to die. Ditch these hang-ups you've got, especially these peculiar sexual hang-ups. If only you'll move on.

[29 : 44] If you'll become one people with us. Well then, of course, people will notice you. You'll have all the success and the growth and the relevance and all the influence that you crave. Why be against us when you can be with us?

Do you think these ancient stories are irrelevant? Couldn't be more contemporary, could it? Well, you see, the people of God here were in real danger.

And the problem is, once you get into the kind of mess like this because you're living too close to the world's culture, it's very, very hard to extract yourself from that without even more mess and heartache and pain.

And that is what we see in the second half in verses 13 to 21 in the vengeance of Jacob's sons. We're told about a deceitful pact but it leads to this graceful pillaging of the city of Shechem. Verses 13 to 24 tell us about this scheming pact which in fact reveals deceit, not just in the Lord's people but also in the pagans. And these verses show us, don't they, how Jacob's son really were a smart team.

[30 : 59] They were a resourceful team. Very quick thinking. Very clever. We'll see that later on, won't we, in the Joseph story. But here, as there, they don't use their strength in the right way.

There's no doubt that the writer agrees with their attitude of grief and anger at Shechem's wrong. But there's also no doubt he is telling us that their conduct is not at all the right way to go about remedying this.

You might think, well, what else could they do? Polite declines seem to be impossible given that Dinah was being held in the city. Maybe they could have made a direct threat. Perhaps verse 17 suggests that.

We'll come and get her. Could they have suggested to the Shechemite prince to really become one of them, to become worshippers of the true God and join them?

Well, perhaps, but however all of that may be, what they chose to do, verse 13, was to act deceitfully. Deceitfully. And that's a word that is always pejorative. As it was back in chapter 27, where Jacob came deceitfully to Isaac and took away the blessing.

[32 : 04] And that just tells us something too, doesn't it? That this behavior was learned at home. And that's another telling word to parents, isn't it?

And despite their outrage, I'm afraid it doesn't seem to be zeal for the honor of God and the honor of His kingdom that drove them here. It just seems to be a personal grudge and fury and anger. Because if you look at verse 15, what they do is they scandal is they abuse the covenant sign of circumcision. They empty it of all of its meaning. They use it utterly sacrilegiously for their own ends.

And that's the essence of sin. Turns things upside down to make God serve us, not the other way around. That's using religion for man's ends.

That's what they're doing here. Here's a sign of God's grace. But instead, it becomes a sign of their grasping. And that is the essence of sectarianism.

[33 : 10] It looks superficially on the outside like a very godly zeal, but it's nothing of the sort. It's the worst kind of religious pride. It's self-serving. It's self-justifying. And it leads to hatred.

It leads to ugly wickedness. And of course, the Shechemites also demeaned the sign of circumcision because for them, too, it was just a way to gain. Look at verse 23.

Their livestock and their property will be ours. Let's do it. It's a small pain, but it's a huge gain. And that can still happen, too, can't it? People do that.

People change their religion outwardly just to be able to marry the person that they want. That happens. People seek baptism sometimes just because it might help their claim for asylum. Well, that happens, too.

We can't be naive, can we? Religious hypocrisy is still with us. It abounds on all sides today just as it did here. And Hamor and Shechem are actually equally deceitful.

[34 : 09] Look at verses 21 to 24. They sell this scheme to their people quite falsely. They don't tell them anything about the real reason of what the prince wants, this woman. And here John Calvin is quite right when he says this.

It's a very common disease that those of rank so often feign consideration for the common good and public advantage when in reality they're just serving their own ends.

Well, think about politicians and bureaucrats and bankers and corrupt dictators and plenty more. Nothing changes, does it? Who is it who gains from wars?

Who is it who gains from so-called pandemics? Who is it who gains from the green deception? Not the people at the bottom, the people at the top.

Verse 23, their livestock, their property will be ours. But surely the point here is that in the name of honor, in the name of distinct holiness, these brothers resort to the same dishonor that shows them utterly indistinct from these pagans all around them.

[35 : 21] They've all got the same motives. They've become utterly defiled in their thinking just as their sister had become defiled in her flesh. And the chapter concludes with an account of a shocking pillaging of the city that brings utter disgrace on the name of Israel.

Even as the shameful passion had brought defilement to Israel. Simeon, Levi, two of Dinah's fool brothers, they led the assault presumably with all their men on the city.

Verse 25, while it felt secure and they butchered all the men in it. It was an act of unmitigated violence and shameless brutality against unarmed people, unsuspecting people.

That was so shocking, obviously, that the writer has no need to elaborate murder in cold blood followed by looting and plundering the dead. In fact, very, very like what happened last year on the October 7th in modern Israel.

But here it was the household of God. And it's a terrible business, a hideous business. No one, no one in this story comes out well.

[36 : 41] Not the brothers, not Dinah, and not Jacob. For all, he condemns their action here in verse 30. Look at it. It's just, well, he's as culpable as they are because he failed to show concern for his daughter.

He failed to act. He allowed his sons to take the initiative and do this. And I think it's very significant. The last word goes to the sons and they are a rebuke to Jacob.

William still is right when he says, in motive, the sons are more righteous than their father, but their revenge is out of all proportion. And it's a sword and a shocking and a savage business.

But it's the real world, isn't it, friends? Even today. This is what we read about. And here it brings disgrace, it brings opprobrium on the Israelites and Jacob.

And he laments in verse 30, although he sounds very pitifully self-preoccupied, doesn't he? A far cry from the wrestler with the angel that we saw just a little time ago. And that's just a reminder, isn't it, that no great spiritual high, no great advance, no great spiritual experience will ever free us from that ongoing battle with sin, however wonderful our experience might be.

[38 : 02] And yet there's also a sense in which these Hivites, too, are meeting judgment at God's hand because they're far from innocent in all of this.

I think the text is pointing that out to us in the way that the same verbs describe the events at the beginning and at the end of the chapter. Do you notice that? At the beginning, Shechem took Dinah and abused her and took her as his wife.

And here in verse 25, Dinah's brothers took their swords. In verse 26, took Dinah. In verse 28, took the flock of the Shechemites. In a very real sense, they also reaped what they sowed.

And God is not mocked, is He? Unrepentant sin will always be judged. Does that mean we could say that Simeon and Levi actually are heroes in this story? Some people think that.

Were they right? Were they riding out to avenge the Lord and His people? No. No, no, no. They're not condoned in their action at all.

[39 : 06] And in fact, if you read later on in Genesis, it's very clear in Genesis 49 that they are disgraced and they're disqualified from their place and from their blessing in the future because of this action.

Jacob says they are cursed because of their cruel wrath and their fierce anger. they're not condoned here. Well, hang on, you might say, doesn't God condone this kind of thing?

Doesn't God command this kind of slaughter of the Canaanites later on in Scripture? In fact, isn't the Old Testament full of this kind of indiscriminate slaughter? Well, the answer to that question is no.

No, it's not. Yes, there are some very specific occasions when God does clearly command His people to be a sword of judgment on evil, like during the conquest under Joshua and so on.

But that is the culmination of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of accumulating guilt. God said that to Abraham hundreds of years before when the sin of the Canaanites reaches its zenith.

[40 : 14] In fact, if you read in Deuteronomy chapter 2 and chapter 3, you'll read of multiple times when God expressly tells His people, don't go and attack others. Do not go to war.

Only, only do that at my specific command. And there's no specific command here. This is not a holy war.

It is an unholy massacre. And friends, nor has there, by the way, ever been any such command to holy war since. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And never will there be a command like that to the church today. That is not because judgment like this is a barbarous relic of a previous time and we are more advanced and understand things better because of Jesus.

No. Jesus Himself is very clear. These judgments will be as nothing in comparison to the great judgment when all rebellious peoples will be punished at His coming.

[41 : 11] It's not because God's judgment has been surpassed but it is because in His great mercy He has declared a day of grace, a day of salvation where His people today, that is the church of Jesus Christ, carry a very different sword.

And that sword is the word of the gospel to bring people captive, yes, but to bring them captive to Christ in His saving mercy. And our place is not to be avengers against a godless society. That was the mistaken folly, wasn't it, at times of the crusades? It's the same mistaken folly that animates many Islamists today in another way. Now we're not to be avengers, nor are we to be appeasers and just be assimilated.

No, we are called, what says the New Testament, we are called to be ambassadors of God's grace and His truth in a dark and dangerous world. We're to share the glory of God's covenant grace now in Jesus Christ.

That's always been God's people's calling. But it wasn't what Israel's family proved to do here. It's a sad story, a shocking story, a story of dishonor, of deceit, disgrace.

[42 : 27] No one, no one comes out of this story well. So what can we say about this chapter in conclusion?

Well, there's two things anyway that we can't fail to grasp amidst all the complexity, all the ambiguity. And the first is to note the abiding mess and misery of sin.

The truth, you see, is that both temptation to sin and the tragedy of sin are persistent and are relentless even within the covenant people of God, even within the family of faith.

That's why Paul says these chapters are written as a warning for us today. These events were just a chain, weren't they, of one tragedy after another.

And it all proceeded logically from an unequal partnership, a far too close relationship with the Canaanite community and with their ways. It's just like Lot's tragic story, do you remember?

[43 : 31] Living too close to the ways of the world, it always ends in tragedy. And if you think that can't happen to you or would happen to you, then I'm afraid I have to tell you, my friend, yes it can.

Yes it can. To individuals, to families, to children, to whole congregations, certainly to denominations and institutions. And once you start to put your toe into that water, it can become almost impossible to get out again with that real mess and far, far worse fallout than you can ever imagine.

Remember Lot's experience, says Jesus. Remember Abraham and Isaac having to be rescued by God, by the scruff of the neck from Pharaoh and from Abimelech.

Remember this awful business here. Don't think this is ancient history. Read the Apostle Paul. It's for us. We face the same temptations. But as Paul says, God does give a way out to avoid tragedy. Flee, he says. Flee now from the world's idolatry. Free before the tragedy takes place. The abiding mess of misery and sin is real and it's terrible.

[44 : 50] We need to be realistic about that and not forget a story like this. But secondly, neither surely can we miss the astonishing mercy of God.

It is relentless and it is triumphant, isn't it? Despite everything. For all the sin, for all the tragedy here, the great threat of assimilation which would have destroyed the covenant people, it is thwarted and their future is secured.

It's nasty. It's costly. There's no credit to anyone in the story at all. But to anticipate words that come much later in Genesis 50 verse 20, what these brothers meant for evil, God meant for good and for the salvation of his people and ultimately for the world.

Because he is the God who takes even the worst evil of man and turns it on his head so that even the wrath of man will praise him and magnify his marvelous mercy.

That's what happened, wasn't it? When in the person of his own beloved son, God himself in the flesh faced the cumulative evil of all the ages of men's sin in his death upon the cross.

[46 : 08] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Men who meant only evil as here.

And yet, Peter says, he was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God for good, for great and glorious good, for the saving of many lives.

All through his astonishing mercy. And that's why, you see, even here in Genesis chapter 34, despite all Jacob's feebleness and foolishness, despite all his family's folly and faithlessness and sin, God is still faithful.

Isn't that astonishing? His mercy. Look at verse 1 of chapter 35. After all of this, God is still speaking to Jacob. And he's still with Jacob.

Verse 3, in the day of his distress. And verse 5, as they go out through these tribes, who must think them utterly heinous, God protects the whole family and will not let them be destroyed.

[47 : 10] All because way back in Genesis chapter 12, God made a promise to Abraham. The same promise that became real for Isaac and for Jacob when in faith he trusted God, the God of Bethel.

And so friends, above all, surely a chapter like this gives us hope, hope in the astonishing mercy of God. If he will stick with a family like this through a mess as bad and as disgusting as that, then there must be hope for you and me, mustn't there?

And your family and my family and our church. Indeed, there is hope and as the New Testament tells us abundantly, a better hope, a better hope in Jesus who guarantees a better covenant and better promises even than these extraordinary promises that Jacob knew.

For he will never leave us or forsake us, not ever. Such is his grace and mercy in Christ.

Amen. Let's pray together. I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And so, Lord, as we sung, though great our sins and sore our woes, your grace much more aboundeth.

[48 : 51] Your helping love no limit knows. Our utmost need it soundeth. Our shepherd good and true are you who will at last set your Israel free.

What marvelous mercy indeed is found in you, the God of the covenant, the God made known so wonderfully and finally in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How we thank you and how we love you and worship you. Amen. Amen.