

Human Sin and God's Grace

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, please do turn back in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 34 as we come to the last two chapters in our series. Given some of the topics raised, I realise that it might be sensitive to some people.

So please, if you want to talk to someone, please grab me after the service and I'm happy to talk with you or pray with you if you would like to do so.

So, well, most books and movies, there are goodies and baddies, aren't there? Heroes and villains. Of course, in the old Westerns, they made it easy for us.

The hero had a white hat and the villain had a black hat, didn't they? And so on the next slide, the 1971 classic, John Wayne is the goodie.

He's got the white hat and Richard Boone is the villain and he wears the black hat. And I love the quotes above there. It says, The baddies wanted gold, but the goodies gave them lead instead.

[1 : 04] You don't get lines like that anymore, do you? And we like knowing who the hero is because we instinctively like to cheer for them, don't we?

And to be with them, to be part of their team, their side. Well, today we come to, as I said, the last two chapters in the account of Isaac's family, which is really focused on one of his sons, Jacob.

And as we begin, it begins with a rather dark chapter of human sin, doesn't it? Where it's actually hard to find the hero. So at point one, your outlines, verse one in your Bibles, chapter 34, verse one.

Now, Dinah, the daughter Leah had born to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. And so here we meet Dinah, Jacob's only daughter, actually, who seems here to be, at the very least, a little bit foolish.

For unmarried women of that culture, we're not meant to go out with a chaperone to protect them. And what's more, at this stage, God's people were to be separate from the land's people.

[2 : 15] But our author says that the daughter of Jacob went out to see, literally, the daughters of the land. It seems like Dinah is leaving as a daughter of God's people to go and join the daughters of the land's people.

Even the word for went out in Hebrew often suggests impropriety. And so it seems Dinah is not entirely good, but she certainly did not, I need to make this clear, did not deserve the horror of what happens next in verse two.

In verse two, Shechem is the prince of the land and an impulsive one. Notice the actions that are listed one after the other in verse two. He saw, he took, he raped.

As prince, he impulsively takes whatever he likes. And this rape of Dinah is shamefully outrageous.

And we're told that at the end of verse seven, that it's an outrageous thing, a thing that should not be done. And it's the same today. It's never permissible.

- [3 : 26] And so it seems we have found our villain, Shechem, and the victim, Dinah. And yet in verse three, we're told that Shechem really does love her.
- In fact, he speaks tenderly to her, perhaps even apologized to her. Certainly in verse four, he now wants to marry her, albeit in a tone to his dad, which is rather impulsive too.
- And then later down the bottom of the page in verse 11 and 12, Shechem writes Jacob's family a blank check, as it were, to pay the bridal price that was customary.
- So look at the bottom of the page. Shechem said to Dinah's father and brothers, let me find favor in your eyes and I will give you whatever you ask. Make the price for the bride and the gift I am to bring as great as you like.
- And I'll pay whatever you ask me. And they give me the young woman as my wife. It seems he is keen to put things right.
- [4 : 35] And in fact, later on in verse 19, he does not hesitate to get circumcised, does he? Which, let's face it, would not have been easy.
- He's keen to put things right. And so perhaps he's not the complete villain we first thought. Yet he's definitely not our hero. And so who is?
- Well, maybe it's Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi. Why? Because just come back with me from verse 5 and 7 for a moment. Verse 5, Jacob heard about what happened to his daughter, but does nothing.
- And then verse 6 and 7, the brothers come in and look halfway through verse 7. 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 be done.
- While Jacob does nothing, the sons are rightly shocked and furious. They rightly say this is outrageous, a thing that should not happen in Israel.
- [5 : 42] And by saying in Israel, they're saying it's not just against Dinah, but it's also against Jacob's whole family. Remember, Jacob's name has been changed to Israel. And so maybe these brothers are the heroes who defend the whole family's honor.
- And yet, look what happens when Hamor comes to strike a deal. In verse 8, Hamor said to them, My son Shechem has his heart set on your daughter.
- Please give her to him as wife. Intermarry with us. Give us your daughters. Take our daughters for yourselves. Settle among us. The land is open to you. Live, trade and acquire property in it.
- And then Shechem makes the blank check statement. And then over the page in verse 13, notice what we're told. Because their sister Dinah had been defiled, Jacob's brothers replied deceitfully as they spoke to Shechem and his father Hamor.
- Who are the sons acting like? Who is the great deceiver throughout this whole story week after week? Jacob, yeah.
- [6 : 55] Like father, like sons. On the next slide is a picture of father and son. One in 1998 where the son wanted to follow in his father's footsteps to be a cop. And he even wrote down the bottom, When I get bigger, I'm going to be my dad's partner and catch bad guys and burglars.
- And there on the right in 2018, 20 years later, he's doing that. He's following in his father's footsteps. It's kind of a nice thing really, isn't it? But here in our passage, Simeon and Levi following in their father's footsteps is not a nice thing.
- They copy their dad's deceitfulness. And so they lay a plan in verse 14 and following. They said to Shechem, Earlier, Hamor had said to them, Why don't you become part of our people?

You know, trade with us, join us. But the brothers rightly say, No, no, you had to become part of our people. You see, the distinguishing mark God gave his people was circumcision.

It reminded them that they were his. And so the brothers are saying, Rather than we join you and your gods, You should join us and our God.

[8 : 31] Of course, it was all a ruse. They were just laying a trap to get them. And so even though what they said was right, The intention behind it was wrong.

Because in verse 25, come down to verse 25, Three days later, While all of them were still in pain from being circumcised, 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 all their wealth And all their women and children, Taking as plunder everything in the houses.

This is not justice, is it? It's vengeance. While Simeon and Levi were rightly outraged, Rightly demanded that Shechem join them, They wrongly deceived and wrongly murdered.

[9 : 50] And then they took Dinah. It doesn't say rescued or saved. It's the same word for when Shechem took Dinah. And it's hard to know whether Dinah was kept there as a captive Or whether she'd actually been won over by Shechem's tender talk And perhaps her desire to be with the women of the land.

Either way, she is taken. Again. And after Simeon and Levi murder all the men, All the other brothers behave like vultures, Walking over the corpses And picking the city clean.

Now while God can sometimes use Israel to judge other nations through war, We're told later in Genesis That what these two brothers do was not acceptable.

They're actually cursed for it. And so on the next slide, Jacob is on his deathbed, And he does these blessings for all his sons. But notice Simeon and Levi are cursed instead.

They are passed over for leadership, Which ends up falling on the next oldest son, Who is Judah, The tribe that King Jesus comes from. And instead Levi is scattered amongst Israel as the priests, Without any land of their own.

[11 : 05] And Simeon's tribe is reduced in size, And was eventually scattered too. The point is, While they rightly defended Dinah, They wrongly took revenge.

And so they can't be our heroes either. Nor is Hamor, Shechem's dad, He doesn't rebuke his son for what he did.

Instead he tries to make a deal to cover it up. And what's more, He persuades all the men of his town to be circumcised, By saying, Look, we're going to get Jacob's property and wealth.

So he seems to have ulterior motives too. And Jacob is probably the worst of all. I mean, Jacob is the main character of his father Isaac's story.

It is the one who's furthest from being the hero of it. And when he hears his only daughter is raped, He does nothing. If that was your daughter or granddaughter, I have two daughters.

[12 : 04] There's no way that I would say nothing or do nothing. Yet he does nothing. And when Hamor acts on behalf of his son, Jacob does not act on behalf of his daughter.

He again stays silent, such that Hamor ends up making the deal with Jacob's sons instead. Jacob is useless. And when he finally does speak at the end of the chapter, for the first time in verse 30, look what he says.

And as I read it, notice how many times the word me is mentioned. Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, verse 30, you have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land.

Literally, it says, I am few in numbers. And if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.

Who does Jacob really care about? Himself. He doesn't care. His sons have just committed genocide. He doesn't really care about his daughter who was raped.

[13 : 13] Jacob is pathetic. He wins the worst dad of the year award by far. In fact, it's actually Jacob's sin that put them in this place to start with.

I remember when Jacob was fleeing Esau, the first time God appeared to him in that stairway dream on the next slide. There's a picture of it. Do you remember that episode? And God made promises to him.

And then Jacob made a conditional vow in return. So on the next slide, God promises one thing. And Jacob says, look, if God's going to do all these things, then God will be his God.

And this place where he's put this stone, Bethel is the name of the place, will be God's house. In other words, he'll build an altar. And he will give a tenth of all that he's given back to God, presumably in sacrifice.

But do you remember what happened at the end of last week? We ran out of time last week. Just turn in your Bibles to the end of chapter 33, or down the bottom of the page, 33 verse 16. Chapter 33, verse 16, down the bottom.

[14 : 26] Earlier in verse 14, Jacob said to his brother Esau, look, oh, you go ahead to Seir, and I'll join you there. But verse 16, that day Esau started on his way back to Seir.

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

And then after Jacob came from Padamaran, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan, and camped within sight of the city. And so on the next slide is a map of the places.

Seir, or Edom, is right down the bottom. That's where Seir was. And the Jabbok River is where Jacob wrestled God, and just south of the Jabbok is where he met Esau.

Instead of going south down to Edom and Seir, he goes north to Succoth, and then goes across to Shechem. But wasn't he supposed to go to Bethel? Isn't that what he promised God he would do?

[15 : 29] The point is, his disobedience has contributed to this mess. If Jacob kept his word and went to Bethel in the first place, he would never have ended up in Shechem.

And so despite being the main character of Isaac's story, Jacob is definitely not the hero of it. In fact, there doesn't seem to be any heroes here, does there?

What we have is a dark chapter that teaches us about humanity's sin. It teaches us, firstly, that sin is ignoring God. It's living life without any reference to God.

I mean, did you notice that in this chapter, God is not mentioned once? Not once. It's a chapter without reference to God, but that's what sin is.

Life without reference to God. Ignoring God. And second, humanity's sin is shameful. I mean, here we, there's rape and murder and deception. By the end of the reading, we're all left reeling, aren't we?

[16 : 36] It's all shamefully outrageous behavior. But again, that's what sin is. To live life without any reference to God who made us, it's shamefully outrageous too.

Whether it takes the form of deceit or even murder. And it's not just shameful. It's also universal. Our search for a hero has been in vain so far, hasn't it?

Each character is sinful in some way. In the world of this chapter, sin is universal, but so too in our world. I'm sure we haven't sinned like Shechem or Simeon, but we've all been disobedient and deceptive at times like Jacob, haven't we?

And we've all certainly lived life without reference to God from time to time. As Paul puts it on the next slide from Romans chapter three, it says that there is no one righteous, not even one.

No one who does good, not even one. I remember a guy would ask people, how are you? And if they replied good, he'd very quickly respond with, no, no, you're not.

[17 : 48] There's no one good. I'm not sure I'd employ that kind of evangelistic strategy, but I actually know some people from this congregation who deliberately answer that question by saying, I'm well, thanks, because they know there is no one good.

Sin is universal. And finally, sin often has knock on effects too. That's what we see both in our lives and the lives of others.

As Simeon and Levi's sin has knock on effects for them later, they are cursed instead of blessed. And Jacob's disobedience has certainly got knock on effects for his family.

It landed them in this situation. And again, this is true in our own lives, isn't it? God will forgive us our sins. Yes. But sometimes we still feel their knock on effects, don't we?

I mean, to go from one extreme, just ask people who become Christians in prison. They are forgiven, but they're still in prison, aren't they? Or ask families where one of the parents has had an affair.

[18 : 53] And they may be forgiven, but the family still feels the knock on effects of their sin, don't they? Or if we speed on the road, we can be forgiven, but we still have to pay the fine.

And that's money we can't use for something else. Or if we consistently complain and grumble when the Bible says to do everything without grumbling, we can be forgiven, but we can earn a reputation as negative people such that we find ourselves with few friends, can't we?

This chapter shows the darkness of humanity's sin that lives without reference to God, is 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 none in this chapter. It's all pretty depressing, isn't it? Aren't you glad you came to church this morning?

Ripper. But it's why we really need the next chapter. For here we see the true hero is God, who shows grace.

[20 : 02] Some more briefly, chapter 35, verse 1. And then God said, after all this, said to 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.

Now, I find this remarkable. I mean, if you were Jacob's God, and you just saw the mess that he and his family have just made, if it was me, I'd at least tell him off.

I'd probably do something worse, but I'd at least tell him off. And yet God says, no, no, there's no judgment. There's just a call to come back to Bethel. It's incredible, isn't it?

This is God's grace. That withholds judgment and graciously calls Jacob to come back to Bethel, where he was supposed to go. His grace that has been with Jacob for the last 10 chapters, calling him, even though he was the younger, being with him and keeping him, even though he was deceptive.

God's grace is unrelenting and amazing, isn't it? I asked my wife, Michelle last night, what she found unrelenting in life. And we both looked at each other and said, kids, one of the kids heard us and said, parents, touche, but most unrelenting things in life are often negative, like work or bills.

[21 : 31] Bills are unrelenting or doctor's appointments can feel unrelenting. But God's grace is something brilliantly positive and unrelenting.

And Jacob now makes use of it. He repents. Verse two. So Jacob said to his household and to all who are with him, get rid of the foreign gods you have with you and purify yourselves and 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 terror of God fell on all the towns around them so that no one pursued them.

And there they arrived at Bethel, which was called Luz. And verse seven, Jacob built an altar and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother Esau.

[22 : 35] You see, Jacob repents, doesn't he? He gets rid of the foreign gods of his household, whether it was the gods that Rachel stole from Laban, if you remember that, or perhaps it was the ones they've just taken from Shechem in part of the loot.

They changed their clothes as a sign of changing their behavior. They give back the earrings, which were also probably part of the plunder.

And they left them behind, buried at Shechem. In other words, it was like they're putting off their old selves. And then they travel to Bethel, and Jacob there finally builds an altar to God, as he promised, and presumably gives a tenth of his livestock on the altar as sacrifice.

You see, Jacob repents. He makes use of God's grace. And in doing so, God protects. In verse 5, Jacob feared from the surrounding cities, remember?

But God's fear came upon them to protect him, even though he didn't deserve it. You see, because he repents, God graciously protects him from the judgment he deserves.

[23 : 47] And then God restores Jacob to right relationship. Have a look at 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 again, he named him Israel. And God said to him, I am the 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, and I'll give this land to your descendants after you.

Then God went up from that 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 he also poured oil on it. Jacob called the place where God had talked with him, Bethel.

Now, if you've got a sense of déjà vu, that's okay, because there is repetition here. God had already called Jacob Israel last week.

[24 : 47] God has already made promises to Jacob the first time he went to Bethel. But by repeating them here, it's as though God is reestablishing his relationship with Jacob, restoring Jacob to a right relationship, even though pathetic Jacob doesn't deserve it.

In fact, these promises are even bigger than the ones God first made at Bethel. And they match the ones God made to Abraham way back in chapter 17. This is how God blessed him, by restoring him and giving him these great promises.

Here is God's unrelenting and amazing grace. So what does this all mean for us? Well, we could highlight the dangers of taking vengeance like Simeon and Levi, or the problems of passive parenting like Jacob, who does nothing.

And they are real dangers. But the bigger lesson is about our sin and God's grace. That firstly, we are to make use of God's grace.

For as we've seen, sin is universal. We too have been disobedient like Jacob, as our second reading said. We too have followed our passions and pleasures, whether it's sexual passion like Shechem, not to that extent, of course, or vengeful passion, now on the road, getting them back.

[26 : 18] 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.

It calls us to repent by putting off our old way of life, like Jacob's family put off their old clothes, burying our gods, whether they be money, career, or health, or simply ourselves, you know, no longer serving them as God, but instead coming to the true God, and not at Bethel, Bethel, but to Jesus, the new house of God, believing in him.

And those who do are saved or protected from the judgment we deserve, eternal death. And instead we are restored to right relationship with God, with eternal life.

But again, it's only for those who make use of it. Those who heed God's call to repent, to come to him by believing in Jesus.

So have you done that? Have you come to God by believing in Jesus? And for us who do, then we are to continue to make use of God's grace, because we continue to sin, don't we?

[27 : 34] Some verses we often say at church, or these on the next slide, from one John, if anyone claims to be without sin, we deceive ourselves. In other words, we all still sin. But notice the second part.

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness. It's terrific, isn't it?

This is what God's grace did for Jacob, and continues to do for us. So do keep making use of God's grace. Keep repenting and confessing our sins.

Like Jacob's family, we're to keep putting off the old sinful nature, and keep putting on Christ's character. For God's grace, we'll keep forgiving and restoring.

And given that, then finally, we ought to praise God for his grace. I sometimes get tired of having to tell my kids the same thing over and over again. You know, unpack your school bags, pick up the clothes off the floor, close the pantry door, do your homework.

[28 : 42] It's unrelenting. Each time they say sorry, and they repent, and they do the same thing, do the right thing, eventually. But one time, it was last year, I think, I was tired, and I just lost it.

I said, that's it. I don't care if you're sorry. I've had enough. You're grounded for the rest of the year. It was an overreaction, I realize. And within seconds, it also 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 sinning over and over again, don't we? And yet, God doesn't lose it with us, does he? Instead, his unrelenting and amazing grace continues to forgive and love.

It's like a kid's prayer I saw on the next slide. 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. It's extraordinary, isn't it? You see, God is the real hero of Jacob's story. That's why the series title has been, Jacob, but God's sovereign grace.

[29 : 58] It's why I've tried to have God in my sermon titles. It's why the author gives us such a dark chapter in 34, to highlight God's grace in 35. And it is a dark chapter, isn't it?

I even noticed that after the reading that Dorothy read, you know, she read the reading, and then she said, this is the word of the Lord. And the reaction, this is a thanks for God. This is murmur.

But the author again includes the dark chapter, to make the good chapter shine more brightly, kind of like jewelers putting a black cloth behind a diamond, to make it shine more brilliantly.

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

God is the real hero. He's the one who wears the white hat. See afresh how brilliant he is, that we might cheer and praise him as our hero, and remain part of his team.

[31 : 05] Praising him not only with our lips, but with our lives as well. Let's pray that we would. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we hear so often of your grace, but we thank you for helping us this morning, see it afresh.

That your grace truly is unrelenting and amazing. Help us therefore to continue to praise you, not only with our lips, but in our lives.

For what other God gives us such unrelenting and amazing grace, but you? We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.