

“IN BUT NOT OF THE WORLD” (Genesis 34:1-31)

You may have read recently about a school district in Utah that voted to remove the Bible from its elementary and middle school libraries. The controversy began when a parent filed a complaint arguing that the Bible is one of the most sex-ridden and violence-filled books around, and cited a number of examples. The school district agreed and labeled the Bible as inappropriate for children. Their decision to pull the holy book from its shelves was met with severe backlash, and just a week or two ago the school district reversed their decision and allowed the Bible back in.

The headline caught my attention because the passage we come to today is sex-ridden and full of violence, and was probably one of the passages cited in the complaint. It's not surprising that many preachers and commentators actually skip over chapter 34 of Genesis, and I was tempted to take a pass on this chapter myself, but the Holy Spirit quickly reminded me that every story in the Bible – no matter how ugly or repulsive – has a purpose in telling the overall story of the Bible. The New Testament says that every story in the Old Testament is written as an example for us to learn from, and this includes the passage we'll look at today. The more I dug into this story I was struck at how relevant it is for the times we live in. The chapter can be approached from a number of different angles, but there is one central message around which the story is told.

We've been studying the life of Jacob, and after being exiled from the Promised Land for twenty years, he is now back in the land. Jacob buys a piece of land just outside the Canaanite city of Shechem, and settles down there with his growing family and the large number of flocks and herds. He's back in the land God promised to him and his descendants, but the land is not empty – it's filled with Canaanites – a conglomeration of pagan people groups known for their extreme wickedness and depravity.

The question that looms over chapter 34 is: How are God's people going to dwell in a land filled with other people who do not fear God or live according to God's ways? How will God's people maintain their unique calling and identity as they are surrounded by people who are not God's people? And that's the question for us today: How do we maintain our unique calling, character, and identity as believers as we live in a dark world that stand opposed to God and His ways?

Jesus taught two parallel truths regarding this question – we are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. God does not call us to retreat from the world and isolate ourselves from unbelievers, but to be the salt and light of the earth – to influence the world for God and point people to salvation in Christ. At the same time, we are not to be of the world – we are not to be conformed to the world, but distinct in the way we live, the way we think, and the way we conduct ourselves.

With this big idea, let's dive into our story – a story that revolves around five people. The first person we meet is Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob. Verse 1 says... “Now Dinah, the daughter Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land.” Dinah, by this time, was a young woman in her teens – most think she was probably in her early teens, between 13-15. She's young, and she's inquisitive. She goes out to see the women of the land. We're not given her motive, but there's something in the text that signals a red flag.

We've already seen a theme repeated several times in Genesis that godly parents like Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah – did not want their sons marrying Canaanite women – they didn't like their ways, their values, or the fact that they worshipped foreign gods – that's why Isaac and Jacob were sent away find wives among Abraham's family.

So as we read verse one, there's something in us that says, "I'm not sure going out alone to mingle with the Canaanite women is such a good idea. Look what happened to Lot's wives and daughters when they were seduced by the culture of Sodom. Dinah could put herself in danger of heading down the same path."

In verses 2-4 we come to the second person in the story – a young Canaanite man named Shechem, whom the city is named after. Shechem is the son of the town leader, Hamor, and is something like a prince, and he's reckless. We read in verse 2... When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of that area, saw her, he took her and raped her. His heart was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. And Shechem said to his father Hamor, "Get me this girl as my wife."

While Dinah might have been naïve and unwise to venture alone into Canaanite land, she is completely innocent. Shechem sees her, takes her by force, and rapes her. This is how the Canaanites lived. When there is no fear of God, when there is no law or moral code, people act according to their base instincts and desires. It was not uncommon for Canaanite men to treat women this way, but the eyes of God's people, Shechem defiled Dinah – he took what was meant to be something beautiful – to be enjoyed in the covenant of marriage – and defiled it.

It's shocking to read that right after he does this, he speaks tenderly to her and professes his love to her. What Shechem does is an inversion of God's original design for marriage... in God's design you see someone, you're attracted to them you show an interest in them, you get to know them, you fall in love, you seek agreement among your families to support the relationship, you get engaged, you have a wedding ceremony stating your vows of commitment, and then you enjoy sexual intimacy.

Shechem does just the opposite – he sees Dinah – "she's beautiful" – he wants her – "I've got to have her" – he takes her by force and rapes her – and then he says, "I love you, let's get to know each other." Then he says to his father, "Get me this girl as my wife."

Sadly, we see the same reverse order in our culture today – the traditional pattern of courtship, engagement, marriage, and sexual union has been turned backwards, and any time we go against God's order and design, there are natural consequences, both individually and as a society. God's way of doing things may seem old-fashioned in our "progressive" world, but God's order and sequence is proven to produce sustained, trusting, committed marriages and families that benefits all of society.

The third person we come to in the story is Jacob. Verse 5... "When Jacob heard that his daughter Dinah had been defiled, his sons were in the fields with his livestock; so he did nothing about it until they came home." Jacob seems remarkably passive in light of what happens to his daughter. Part of his passivity might have to do with the fact that Dinah was the daughter of Leah, the wife he did not love. Later, when Jacob is told that Joseph – the son of his favorite wife Rachel, had been killed – he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for several days. Here the reaction is much different, and it makes you mad. Most dads would immediately spring into action and do everything possible to seek justice for their daughter. Instead, Jacob waits until his sons come home from the fields, and from this point on he takes a backseat in the story, while his sons take center stage.

The next major players in the story are the sons of Jacob, and their reaction is much different. Verses 6-7... “Then Shechem’s father Hamor went out to talk with Jacob. Meanwhile, Jacob’s sons had come in from the fields as soon as they heard what had happened. They were shocked and furious, because Shechem had done an outrageous thing in Israel by sleeping with Jacob’s daughter—a thing that should not be done.”

They have the appropriate response – they’re shocked that such an outrageous thing had been done in Israel. It’s an interesting phrase because Israel is not yet established as a nation, but they are God’s distinct people, and to do such a thing against God’s chosen people was egregious.

The brothers are not only shocked, but angry – and they should be angry. Like every emotion, anger can be positive or negative. As to when anger is appropriate, a good rule of thumb is that we should get angry at what makes God angry – as those made in God’s image, we should share His anger in what makes Him angry. The Bible says that God is slow to anger – He is patient and longsuffering – but He is also holy, and gets angry when His holiness is dishonored and His righteous laws are violated. His anger is not like a child who doesn’t get his way, stomps His feet, and throws a fit – it’s an appropriate, justified anger based on who He is. In the same way, God wants us to be angry at evil, but to express our anger in an appropriate way that leads to justice and not revenge.

In verse 8 we come to the fifth character in the story, and that is Shechem’s father Hamor. Verses 8-10... But Hamor said to them, “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 among us; the land is open to you. Live in it, trade in it, and acquire property in it.”

One of the sub-themes of the story is bad parenting. Whereas Jacob is passive and under-parents, Hamor is pro-active and over-parents. He’s the kind of dad who, when called into the principal’s office, takes the side of his child no matter what he or she has done. He does not seem bothered by what his son does to Dinah – but enables his son to get the girl he wants.

Hamor proposes that his family – the Shechemites – intermarry with Jacob’s family – so that both families will benefit economically through their combined forces. This is a key moment in redemptive history. If Jacob’s sons marry the daughters of the Canaanites, the people of Israel will cease to be distinct, they will lose their unique calling and identity, and put God’s plan to save the world through Abraham’s people in jeopardy.

When Israel later comes back to the Promised Land after the exodus, God instructed to remove the Canaanites lest they become ensnared in their ungodly lifestyle and practices. In Deuteronomy 7:3-4 God says, “Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.”

King Solomon is prime example of why God gave them command. To strengthen his economic ties and indulge his fleshly desires, Solomon took wives from multiple nations, and the result was exactly as God predicted. 1 Kings 11:4 says, “As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”

God gives us the same command to us in the New Testament, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14). Do not engage in any kind of intimate relationship or partnership with anyone who does not share your commitment to Christ. This is true of any relationship – especially in a dating relationship. If you yoke yourself together with those who do not share your faith, you put your spiritual life in peril.

1 Corinthians 15:33 says, “Bad company corrupts good character.” We tend to become like the people we are with. Some might say, “Well, perhaps if he or she is around me, my faith will rub off on them.” Perhaps, but that rarely happens. Like Solomon, their hearts are drawn away from God. If you’re not married, and you’re looking, resolve in your heart that you will not invest in a relationship with someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ. More than that, resolve that you will not just marry someone who says they believe in Christ, but who is following Him. The time to decide who you will invest time with begins before you ever go on a date. Once you begin dating an unbeliever and get emotionally invested and fall in love, it’s extremely hard to break things off. That’s my mini-sermon, now back to the main sermon...

Verses 11-12... Then 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. Only give me the young woman as my wife.”

The whole idea of a dowry is foreign to us, but in ancient culture payment for a bride was less about trying to buy a bride, as much as it was about trying to reimburse her family for lost labor. When a bride was married, the family of the bride lost part of their workforce and a dowry made up for that loss. Shechem says, “Name your price – I’ll pay whatever you ask.” Shechem, after raping Dinah, has the audacity to ask for her hand in marriage.

At this point, Jacob’s sons become the family spokesmen, and they have no intention of letting Shechem marry their sister. They have a plan, and it involves deceit – the same kind of deceit often practiced by their father. Verses 13-17... Because their sister Dinah had been defiled, Jacob’s sons replied deceitfully as they spoke to Shechem and his father Hamor. They said to them, “We can’t do such a thing; we can’t give our sister to a man who is not circumcised. That would be a disgrace to us. We will enter into an agreement with you on one condition only: that you become like us by circumcising all your males. Then we will give you our daughters and take your daughters for ourselves. We’ll settle among you and become one people with you. But if you will not agree to be circumcised, we’ll take our sister and go.”

The brothers say, “If you want Dinah, if you want our two peoples to come together, you must be circumcised like we are.” Circumcision was the sign God gave Abraham in Genesis 17 that his people belonged exclusively to God and were distinct from the other nations. How could Jacob’s sons possibly use such a sacred sign to make an agreement with godless people and become one with them? We find out later that it was a ruse.

Verses 18-23... Their proposal seemed good to Hamor and his son Shechem. The young man, who was the most honored of all his father’s family, lost no time in doing what they said, because he was delighted with Jacob’s daughter. So Hamor and his son Shechem went to the gate of their city to speak to the men of their city. “These men are friendly toward us,” they said. “Let them live in our land and trade in it; the land has plenty of room for them. We can marry their daughters and they can marry ours. But the men will agree to live with us as one people only on the condition that our males be circumcised, as they themselves are. Won’t their livestock, their property and all their other animals become ours? So let us agree to their terms, and they will settle among us.”

When Hamor spoke to Jacob he claimed one thing – everyone will benefit from us coming together – but when he speaks to the men of his city, he tells different story. He tells them that this agreement will benefit them... “Let’s agree to get circumcised, let’s get Jacob’s family to become one with ours, and we’ll take all his wealth from him.” Both sides are being deceitful. Let’s read on to find out what happens next...

Verses 24-29... “All the men who went out of the city gate agreed with Hamor and his son Shechem, and every male in the city was circumcised. Three days later, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword and took Dinah from Shechem’s house and left. The sons of Jacob 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.”

The plan of the brothers was cunning – get all the men of the city to be circumcised, and while they’re all in pain and incapacitated, move in and put them all to the sword. We find out in verse 26 that Dinah was being held at Shechem’s house, so the brothers are on a rescue mission. Part of us wants to think that what they do here is honorable and justified – they are making right a great wrong – they’re holding wrongdoers accountable – and they’re rescuing their sister. And part of us says, “This goes way, way too far. Seeking justice against Shechem is one thing, but killing all the men of the city and then looting and ransacking the city doesn’t sound like justice. It sounds like blind rage.”

This story reminds us why we need laws. Without law, there is anarchy, and throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, God gives Israel a number of laws to govern their nation, as well as their interaction with the other nations. One of those laws pertains to what happens here. Leviticus 24:19-20 says, “Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.”

The “eye for an eye” law was intended to be used literally, but as a guiding principle. If someone knocked someone’s tooth out, the guilty person didn’t stand before a judge and have his tooth knocked out. The idea of the law is to ensure justice through some form of fair compensation to. The law also served to limit people from taking personal vengeance. If you knock one of my teeth out, my human reaction is to knock two of your teeth out. If you steal my cow, I’m going to burn your house down. It’s human nature to get even, and even go beyond what they did to you. The “eye for an eye” law said you can’t do that. You don’t take the law into your own hands – you let the court system figure it out to leads to a fair and just punishment.

The New Testament tells us to leave vengeance up to God. “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay.” This is especially true for countries unlike our own that do not have a system of law – there are many who must wait for God’s final judgement to receive justice. Even if we do not receive justice in this life – and even in our judicial system that is sometimes the case – God promises to make all wrongs right in the final judgment to come – and we must ultimately leave justice in His hands.

One thing that stood out to me in reading this story is the importance of controlling emotions and passions. Shechem saw Dinah and was attracted to her – a normal, God-given desire – but his desires turned to lust and he seized her – there were no brakes, there was no self-control – he recklessly gave into his desires and paid for it with his life. Jacob’s sons were angry – a very appropriate emotion – but their anger turned to out-of-control, blind rage and they wiped out an entire city.

The story ends in verses 30-31 with Jacob finally speaking up... 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. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed.” But they replied, “Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?”

Jacob doesn't say anything when Dinah is raped, and he doesn't say anything when Hamor proposes an agreement that could put God's plan for his family in jeopardy, but what finally rouses him and gets him to speak is how his sons' actions will affect him... "Look what you've done to me – look at the trouble you've caused me – look how difficult you've made my life." All Jacob thinks about is how others think of him. If Jacob had done something in the first place – if he demanded his daughter back and rejected any agreement – if he had shown godly leadership – all this could have been avoided.

Jacob's sons pose the question Jacob should have asked, "Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?" Maybe we didn't go about things the right way, but dad... what were you doing? Didn't you care that they defiled our sister and treated her like a prostitute?" The lesson in this is when a leader does not pursue justice in the right way, someone else will come along to pursue justice in the wrong way. Jacob's cowardly indifference left the door open to his son's zealous overreaction.

Jacob's family came very close to losing their distinction, but God was faithful to override the sinful choices and actions of His people and to protect Jacob's family from being assimilated into the world. It is yet another example of God, in His grace, working all things together for good – even things that are evil.

The school district in Utah was right in saying that the Bible contains stories that are sex-ridden and violent, but the Bible does not endorse this behavior, but shines a light upon it. This story is written to expose the tragic consequences of ignoring God's design, and to warn us of the dangers of getting too close to the world.

The events of this story prompt us to ask some hard questions...

- Is there any way, like Dinah, in which I am getting too close to the world? Am I entangled in the world in such a way that the world is shaping me more than I am shining as a light in the world? Am I in the world but not of the world?
- Is there any way, like Shechem, where my sexual passions are out of control? If you're single, have you resolved to follow God's sequence and order of marriage, and not yoke yourself to an unbeliever?
- If you're a parent, ask yourself... Like Jacob, am I actively leading my family or am I passive and indifferent? Like Hamor, am I over-parenting and enabling my children to do what is wrong and harmful?
- Is there any way, like Jacob's son, where my pursuit of justice has given way to vengeance?
- Is there any way, like Jacob, where I'm more concerned about how I appear to others than how I appear to God? Am I more concerned about pleasing God or fitting in? Am I willing to march to the beat of a different drum even if it makes me strange in the world's eyes?

The events of this chapter remind us how weak and sinful we are, and how desperately we need the grace and forgiveness of God. Partaking of Lord's Table is a tangible, hands-on practice that demonstrates the grace and forgiveness of God – that while sinners, Christ died for us.