

“THE TRAGIC RESULTS OF DISOBEDIENCE”

Jacob now had twelve sons, he had become a rich man, he was back in the land of Canaan, and his reunion with Esau went far better than he could have imagined. Everything was set up for him to settle down and live the rest of his days in peace. But it was not to be. And this should come as no surprise to readers of the book of Genesis. All throughout this book we have seen how, time and time again, God’s gracious provision for his people is almost immediately followed by a monumental failure on their part. God placed Adam and Eve in a garden that was very good, but they proceeded to ruin it all by doing the one thing that God forbade them to do. God brought Noah and his family through the flood, but then Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk. God sealed his covenant promises to Abraham with a self-maledictory oath, but then Abraham tried to produce offspring through Hagar. God saved Lot from the destruction that came upon Sodom, but then Lot’s daughters committed incest with him. God blessed Isaac with a wife and two sons, but Isaac put his marriage in jeopardy by telling Abimelech that Rebekah was his sister. Again and again, we see people responding to God’s goodness and grace by doing what seems right in their own eyes. And we see the same thing happening in this passage. God was exceedingly good to Jacob. It is true that God did not spare his rod of discipline, but all of the hardships that Jacob had gone through were for his own good. God used them to open his eyes to see the ugliness of his sin. And when Jacob finally returned to Canaan, he was indeed a changed man. But he still failed to do what God wanted him to do. He made his home in Shechem, when God had told

him to return to Bethel. This act of disobedience might not seem that serious, but it had serious consequences. It put Jacob and his family in jeopardy, and it resulted in what commentator Derek Kidner describes as a chain of evil events: rape, treachery, and massacre. [172] In this passage we see how disobedience puts us in danger of being absorbed into the ungodliness of the unbelieving world.

Dinah was Jacob's daughter by Leah. She is the only one of Jacob's daughters to be mentioned by name, and this passage is the reason why she is named. She was probably a young teenager when the events described here took place. The text tells us that Dinah "went out to see the women of the land." This is a fairly vague statement, and it is impossible for us to know what her exact motivations were. However, this action does not reflect very well on Dinah, or on her parents. The image that comes to mind is one that is all too familiar. It is a scene that is played out in countless households in our land: a girl is not given the love and attention that she needs to receive from her father, and she ends up looking for it someplace else. The girl may not initially go running after boys, but she gets mixed up with the wrong crowd and things go downhill from there. Dinah's story stands as a warning to every parent. It is a sad example of what happens when we neglect our children and allow them to mingle with the world.

While verse 1 gives a strong indication that Dinah was not entirely innocent in this matter, the terminology used in verse 2 makes it clear that what Shechem did to Dinah was utterly reprehensible and almost certainly against her will. At the same time, the text does not portray Shechem as a figure of unmitigated evil. The picture that we are given

here is not that of a devil, but of a man. He is a sinful man, to be sure, but a man nonetheless. Shechem seems to have had a genuine affection for Dinah. He did not toss her aside once he had his way with her. He wanted his father to make arrangements for her to be his wife. And he was willing to pay a generous bride price to get her. None of this excuses him in the least for the crime that he committed against Dinah, but it does remind us that he was a human being.

One of the things that stands out in this passage is the contrast between Jacob's response to what happened and his sons response to it. Jacob held his peace when he heard about Shechem's actions. He did not say or do anything. This strikes us as a bit odd. It is not the way a father responds when he receives this kind of news. And it is not as though Jacob was a man who did not like to show his emotions. He certainly showed them in chapter 37, when his sons told him that Joseph had been killed. When he received that news, he tore his garments, put on sackcloth, and mourned for many days, refusing to be comforted. But none of this for Dinah. He seems to have been relatively unconcerned about her disgrace, and his lack of family leadership in responding to this crisis led his sons to take matters into their own hands. Jacob's failure to respond appropriately to Dinah's disgrace indicates that his attitude towards her was along the same lines as his attitude towards her mother, towards Leah. He did not love Leah, and he appears not to have cared very much for her daughter either.

While Jacob responded to the evil that had been done to Dinah too mildly, his sons responded to it far too harshly. By my calculations, they broke at least five of the ten

commandments in this episode. They bore false witness when they deceived Shechem and Hamor. They took God's name in vain when they used the God-given sign of circumcision as a tool for carrying out their deception. They committed murder. They committed theft. And in all of this they dishonored their father.

One of the principles that we see in all of this is how one sin leads to more sins, and how the sins that follow are often much more serious than the initial sin. Jacob's failure to provide family leadership led to his sons' despicable actions. The lie told by Jacob's sons paved the way for them to murder and plunder an entire city. They had a right to be angry, but their actions went far beyond what could be considered retributive justice. They allowed their anger to take control over their hearts, and it led them to do something brutal. This is why it is so important for us to be absolutely merciless in our war against indwelling sin. We must not tolerate any sin in our lives, not even a seemingly "little" sin. Little sins pave the way for bigger sins. As J. Gresham Machen put it, "It is through the 'little sins' that Satan gains an entrance in our lives." [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 67] Our war against sin is a lifelong battle, and it has to be an all-out battle on our part.

Of course Shechem and Hamor were hardly innocent victims in this. We have already noted the wickedness of Shechem's actions at the beginning of the passage. But that is not the only place where we see the sinfulness of the Shechemites. Hamor might seem to come across as fairly respectful when he is negotiating with Jacob and his sons, but we need to remember that as he does this Dinah is still being held at Shechem's house. We do not know if she was staying there willfully or against her will, but the fact

that she had not been returned made this negotiation into a variation on the proverbial shotgun wedding. The Shechemites already had Dinah. Jacob and his sons had no leverage. They were not in a position to refuse.

And on top of this, Hamor and Shechem were far from entirely forthcoming when they tried to persuade the men of their city to go ahead and get circumcised. Like seasoned politicians, they put just the right spin on the situation to make it sound like it would be utterly foolish to refuse. And of course, they conveniently left out the part about how it was Shechem's lust and lack of self-control that got them into this mess in the first place. These men were seasoned manipulators. They knew how to get people to do what they wanted.

I want to point out two important applications that we can draw from this passage. The first is this: *we put ourselves and our families in great spiritual danger when we do not do the things that God has instructed us to do.* When we set aside the duties to which God calls us, we put ourselves in great danger. The neglect of duties belongs to the category of sin known as sins of omission. We typically think of sin in terms of the other category: sins of commission, the sins that involve doing something that God forbids. But sins of omission, the sins that involve failing to do something that God requires, are just as serious. In our passage, it was Jacob's sins of omission that brought this entire situation upon him and his family. He did not follow God's instruction to go back to Bethel. He did not give his daughter the love and attention that he should have. He did not protect her from the allure of the ungodly culture that surrounded them. And he did

not provide the leadership that was needed to help his family respond to this crisis in the right way. Jacob's sins of omission paved the way for many sins of commission.

The principle behind this was once summed up by the Puritan William Gurnall in these words: "Sins of commission are usual punishments for sins of omission. He that leaves a duty may soon be left to commit a crime." This is so true to our experience. Professing Christians who neglect corporate worship often fall into idolatry, putting other things where God ought to be in their hearts. Parents who neglect their duties with respect to the Christian nurture of their children often see their children grow up to be great transgressors. Husbands who neglect to show their wives the love that they owe them often end up lusting after other women. When we fail to do what we ought to do, we end up doing what we ought not do.

The second point of application that I want to emphasize is this: *we must remain alert to the danger of being absorbed into the world.* God's people are called to be holy, to be set apart, to be distinct from the world. We see this so clearly in Genesis by the manner in which God called Abraham: he called him to separate from his father's house and from his homeland and to go to the place that God showed him. And we see the same thing all throughout the Bible. Both Israel and the church are told that they are to be holy as God is holy. [Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16] Paul is continually addressing his letters to those who are "called to be saints." The Bible tells us that we must neither love the world nor be conformed to it. But the world is always trying to absorb the church into itself, just as Shechem and Hamor were eager to claim Jacob's livestock and property as

their own. The world exerts constant pressure upon the church to conform to its mold. The world tries to persuade God's people of the benefits of entering into an alliance with it, just as Hamor tried to persuade Jacob that he would benefit from entering into an alliance with him. The world tries to make itself seem attractive and appealing, while simultaneously trying to make the church's beliefs and practices seem odd and out of step. Theologian David Wells defines worldliness as "what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd." [*God in the Wasteland*, 29] The devil is no fool. He tries to make sin seem attractive and full of life, while making righteousness seem drab, boring, and lifeless. Of course, this is a baldfaced lie. It is the exact inversion of what is really true. The psalmist tells us that man who walks in the ways of the Lord is like a fruitful tree, but the wicked man is like chaff that the wind blows away. Paul tells us that setting the mind on the flesh is death, but setting the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. Nevertheless, many people are led astray by the allure of worldliness. You can be sure that when Dinah went out into the world that day she thought she would find a good time. She certainly did not think that her actions would end up ruining her life. But that is what happens when we walk in the ways of an ungodly world.

This sad story reminds us that we, like Jacob, are completely dependent upon the Lord for our salvation. And at the same time, it also shows us that we cannot let down our guard for a moment. We must not become careless and lax regarding the duties to which God has called us. We have a race to run, and we will not be finished running it until the Lord calls us to himself. We must run with endurance, laying aside the sin

which clings so closely, and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. And when we stumble in our race, as Jacob stumbled in this passage, we can take comfort in knowing that God picked him up and gave him the strength to keep on going to the end.