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## THE GREAT LETDOWN

### *SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE*

By Scott Grant

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#### **Disturbing chapter**

David Livingstone, the famous Scottish missionary, died in 1873 after a long illness at age 60. On his 59th birthday, he wrote these words in his journal: “My Jesus, my king, my life, my all; I again dedicate my whole self to thee.” He was found dead, kneeling beside his bed, with his head buried in his hands. By all appearances, he had been praying. He remained fervently dedicated to the Lord up to the end.

Unlike Livingstone, Jacob suffers a huge spiritual letdown after having come so far. His story reminds us that there is no place for resting on laurels in the spiritual life and teaches us that passivity comes with a price.

Genesis 34 is one of the most disturbing chapters in all of scripture. I love Genesis 32-33. I have often thought of teaching those chapters at a retreat, but *never* have I thought of Genesis 34 as retreat material. Yet Genesis 34 is every bit the word of God that Genesis 32-33 is, so we must study it and teach it. To neglect such a passage, which slaps us in the face with wickedness of our world, is to risk living in denial.

Genesis 34, like Genesis 26, constitutes something of a digression in the Jacob narrative. These two digressions appear near the beginning and end of the narrative. Genesis 26 linked the Jacob narrative to the previous narrative by focusing on Isaac, Jacob’s father. Genesis 34 links the Jacob narrative to the next narrative by focusing on his sons.

The narrator of Genesis is concerned with the Abrahamic Covenant, a feature of which concerns the call of Abraham’s people to be a blessing to the nations. Both Genesis 26 and Genesis 34 concern how the people of Abraham interact with the nations. Both show that a patriarch mistreated a woman: Isaac endangered his wife by presenting her as his sister, and Jacob does nothing about the rape of his daughter, Dinah.

The narrator in Genesis 34-35 depicts Jacob’s life in microcosm. Jacob’s life has largely been about his failure and God’s grace. In Genesis 34, he fails. In Genesis 35, God responds with grace. The hopeful sign is that in Genesis 35 Jacob is more responsive to God than he has been in the past.

After his reunion with Esau in Genesis 33, Jacob is on the verge of returning to Bethel, where God first appeared to him, and to his father, but he gets waylaid in Shechem.

#### **Shechem rapes Dinah**

**Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force. He was deeply attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, “Get me this young girl for a wife.”** (Genesis 34:1-4)

The narrator briefly mentioned the birth of Dinah in Genesis 30:21 to prepare us for her appearance in this scene. He identifies her as “the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Jacob.” At first, Jacob cared little for Leah, so we may now wonder: How much does he care for his daughter by Leah?

Dinah’s intentions were to pay a social visit on the local women and on the face of it, this seems innocent enough. However, the narrator has already noted the wickedness of the Canaanite women (Genesis 24:3; 28:1, 6). The Hivites, who inhabit this city, are a class of Canaanites. Where the women are, the men are also and so to venture forth in this manner, especially without escort, is to court disaster. (Today, like Dinah, some girls, and some women—not to mention some boys and some men—court disaster in the way they dress, the way they act and the places they visit.) However, Jacob bears some of the responsibility for Dinah’s actions because he is not proactive on his daughter’s behalf.

Literally, Dinah went out to “see” the women. However, Shechem, the son of Hamor, the Hivite prince, “saw” her. He liked what he saw, so he raped her. The narrator tells us that Shechem “took” her. Esau twice used the same word in Genesis 27:36 when he said Jacob “took” his birthright and blessing. Jacob, it seems, can’t escape his past. He illicitly took what belonged to Esau; now someone else illicitly takes his daughter.

Literally, Shechem “cleaved” to Dinah, as if she were his wife (Genesis 2:24). The narrator in two places has already told us that Dinah was Jacob’s daughter. He informs us again in verse 3 to highlight Jacob’s responsibility in the matter. Further, Shechem offers no apology, nor does he make reparations. In fact, he has the temerity, after raping Dinah, to woo her with tender words. He may speak tenderly to her face, but when he speaks of her to his father it’s as if she were a commodity: “Get me this young girl for a wife.”

Here’s a man who gets what he wants with no concern for propriety. He is somewhat like what we’ve seen from Jacob for most of his life, though Jacob never used force. Shechem has intercourse with Dinah (by force!); then he cleaves to her as if she were his; then he woos her with words; then he seeks marriage. As the God of Jacob has decreed, intercourse belongs to marriage, and if marriage is sought, it should be preceded by words of tenderness.

## **Jacob’s sons react**

**Now Jacob heard that [Shechem] had defiled Dinah his daughter; but his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob kept silent until they came in. Then Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.** (Genesis 34:5-7)

The narrator has depicted the scene in such a way that we expect Dinah’s father to be outraged. When David heard that Amnon raped Tamar, he was “very angry” (2 Samuel 13:21). We expect Jacob to feel similar rage. Instead, Jacob hears about the rape and remains silent. The narrator doesn’t tell us whether he felt anything at all.

Jacob's sons were in the field when Jacob heard the news. Elsewhere in the Jacob narrative, when someone comes in from the field, it means someone is about to be taken advantage of (Genesis 25:29, 27:30, 30:16) and such will be the case here. Hamor, the father of Shechem, seeks to take advantage of Jacob, but his agreement with the sons of Jacob will backfire. Notice how the story places Hamor, the pagan father of Shechem, in a better light than Jacob, the Hebrew father of Dinah. Hamor at least is a man of action. Jacob does nothing for his daughter. When Dinah was raped, Jacob should have gone to Hamor, but instead, he waits until Hamor comes to him.

Notice though that when Jacob's sons hear what happened to their sister, they are anything but passive. They are "grieved" and, like David, "very angry." The narrator comments that such a disgraceful thing ought not to be done, particularly "in Israel," the people of God. Jacob's family had not yet become the nation of Israel. Jacob's name, however, has just been changed to Israel because of his new relationship with God. This is both an indictment against Jacob and a warning against such behavior to the first readers of Genesis, who comprised the nation of Israel. Jacob's "sons" react when "Jacob's daughter" is raped, but Jacob doesn't.

Later, when Jacob assumes that his son Joseph is dead, he "mourned for his son for many days," he "refused to be comforted," he expected to mourn for the rest of his life and he wept (Genesis 37:34-35). Jacob, if he were to lose his son Benjamin, also envisioned mourning until his death (Genesis 42:38).

Why is Jacob so concerned for these two sons and not for his daughter? Joseph and Benjamin were the only children born to Rachel, his favorite wife, so he favored them. Jacob was less inclined toward Leah and, therefore, his daughter by her.

### **Hamor proposes intermarriage**

**But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. Thus you shall live with us, and the land shall be open before you; live and trade in it and acquire property in it." Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, "If I find favor in your sight, then I will give whatever you say to me. Ask me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give according as you say to me; but give me the girl in marriage." (Genesis 34:8-12)**

Hamor came to speak to Jacob, but the passive father is joined by his outraged sons. Hamor not only proposes marriage on behalf of his son, he proposes large-scale intermarriage between the two peoples. This, he suggests, will work to the economic advantage of Jacob's family. The narrator has already made his feelings clear about intermarriage. Also, in Deuteronomy 7:3-4, he warns the Israelites against marrying the people of the land, who would turn them toward other gods.

Such reasoning is still valid today. Followers of Jesus shouldn't marry those who worship other gods, in part because of how the other gods may influence them.

Shechem even goes his father one better by offering Jacob's family an over-the-top bridal gift, saying, in essence, "name your price." Jacob offered an over-the-top price for Rachel: seven years of service (Genesis 29:18). Shechem asks the family to "give me the girl in marriage." Jacob told Laban, "Give me my wife" (Genesis 29:21). Neither Shechem nor Jacob used the woman's name, and each spoke of her as if referring to a commodity.

Shechem says, "If I find favor in your sight, then I will give whatever you say to me." Jacob, knowing

that God had shown him favor, used similar words when he was seeking forgiveness from Esau. Jacob, like Shechem, offered a “gift” to the party in question (Genesis 33:8, 10). Shechem, unlike Jacob, shows no vulnerability, no humility and no remorse.

Jacob, because of his experience with Rachel and Esau, should be able to see right through Shechem for Shechem is merely a violent version of a younger Jacob. Alas, he remains on the sidelines. Evidently, he doesn't care to see the truth. Instead, Jacob allows his sons to respond to Shechem and Hamor. They do so with deceit, a tactic they no doubt learned from their father (Genesis 27:35). On the positive side, they feel moral outrage, act on behalf of “their sister” and call her “our sister,” putting their father to shame, who did nothing about his daughter.

### **Jacob's sons make a counterproposal**

**But Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with deceit, because he had defiled Dinah their sister. They said to them, “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 consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised, then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live with you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go.”** (Genesis 34:13-17)

The sons make a counterproposal. They will agree to the Hivites' terms if the men of the city are circumcised. God gave the rite of circumcision to Abraham and his descendants as a sign of his covenant with them (Genesis 17:10). If the Hivites agree, the sons say, they will become “one people” with them. The sons abuse the sacred rite of circumcision, as it turns out, in order to murder the people they would become one with.

Of course, they have no business becoming one people with the Hivites, who worship other gods. The sons of Jacob, in ostensibly going along with the Hivites' proposal, make a mockery of marriage. This arrangement is even more botched than the one between Jacob and Laban by which Jacob ended up with two wives. Clearly, the sons learned a few things—most of them not good—about marriage from their parents.

If we have lived by taking from others, we shouldn't be surprised if something is taken from us. If we treat people like commodities, we shouldn't be surprised if someone close to us, or we ourselves, are treated like a commodity. If we practice deceit, or if we neglect our marriage, we shouldn't think that our children aren't watching and learning.

When the whole earth endeavored to be “one people” apart from the Lord, he put an end to the project (Genesis 11:6). As Genesis 34 unfolds, the sons of Jacob will be anything but the blessing to the nations that they were called to be (Genesis 12:1-3, 28:14).

If the Hivites agree to their terms, the sons of Jacob say, they will “give our daughters to you.” If not, they will “take our daughter and go.” They call Dinah their daughter, as if they were speaking for their silent father.

But this leaves us with a question: Where exactly is Dinah? We haven't heard anything about her whereabouts since she went out to visit the daughters of the land. The narrator gives us a hint in verse 17 but doesn't answer the question until later in the story. Shechem “took” Dinah by force and raped her. The sons seem to be threatening that they will “take” her back.

## The Hivites agree

**Now their words seemed reasonable to Hamor and Shechem, Hamor's son. The young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. Now he was more respected than all the household of his father. So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, "These men are friendly with us; therefore let them live in the land and trade in it, for behold, the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters in marriage, and give our daughters to them. Only on this condition will the men consent to us to live with us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock and their property and all their animals be ours? Only let us consent to them, and they will live with us." All who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and to his son Shechem, and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city. (Genesis 34:18-24)**

Hamor and Shechem—particularly Shechem—respond favorably to the offer. Shechem is portrayed as a man of influence. Hamor and Shechem gather the men of the city at the gate, the place where legal and commercial transactions were negotiated. They put their own spin on the sons' counterproposal in order to persuade their fellow citizens.

First, they say the men are "friendly." The men are anything but friendly, but Shechem, who is blinded by lust, can't see it. When proposing intermarriage to Jacob's family, Hamor and Shechem told the newcomers that they could acquire "property" in the land. Now they tell their fellow citizens: "Will not their livestock and their property and all their animals be ours?" Hamor and Shechem offered Jacob's family economic prosperity, but in reality they intended to rule over—and prosper from—the family.

Lured by the hope of prosperity, the men of the city pay the price of circumcision.

## Jacob's sons attack

**Now it came about on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and came upon the city unawares, and killed every male. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem's house, and went forth. Jacob's sons came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses. (Genesis 34:25-29)**

Three days after the Hivites are circumcised, Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, spring into action. In one sense, the punishment fits the crime. Ironically, the men of the city are weakened in the body part that Shechem used to rape Dinah. The demand of circumcision was a ploy in order to weaken the men of the city. For the first time since verse 1, Dinah's name is used. Her brothers take up her honor.

They also take up their swords and slaughter the unsuspecting—and weakened—men of the city. The narrator finally lets us know that Dinah had been living in Shechem's house, evidently against her will. Jacob's passivity, therefore, is all the more reprehensible. Simeon and Levi kill Hamor and Shechem last of all and then rescue their sister.

Earlier, Dinah "went out" (*yasa*) to visit the daughters of the land, and Shechem "took" her by force. The narrative comes full circle: Simeon and Levi "took" Dinah and "went forth" (*yasa*). Shechem used force to have intercourse with Dinah, and Simeon and Levi use force to rescue her. Dinah had gone out,

and now her brothers bring her back.

The rescue operation is justified. However, killing every man of the city, apart from the direction of the Lord, is not. The aftermath compounds the matter: Jacob's sons loot the city. Rescuing their sister who was raped is one thing; raping the city of the one who raped their sister is another. Having made a mockery of both circumcision and marriage, the sons of Jacob now make a mockery of holy war. They engage in it without the Lord's direction, and they collected the spoils for themselves instead of dedicating them to the Lord (Numbers 31:1-24). Jacob censures Simeon and Levi, both in this text and in Genesis 49:5-7.

Without doubt, the proper response when someone close to us is somehow violated is moral outrage. When the powerful abuse the powerless, we should be offended, as the sons of Jacob were. We should stand up in the name of justice. But it is all too easy to take justice into our own hands, turn it into vengeance and find biblical rationale for doing so. When we do so, we overreact. We go too far. We abuse the scriptures, just as surely as the sons of Jacob abused circumcision, marriage and holy war. We make a mockery of the faith, and the reputation of the gospel suffers.

Let us not forget that the Old Testament injunction of "an eye for an eye" was meant to limit the punishment so that it did not exceed the crime. The law mitigated against the tendency to overreact (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20).

The Muslims may have their suicide bombers, who find reason for their actions in their scriptures, but we have our abortion clinic bombers, who co-opt our scriptures. Moral outrage is appropriate. Advocacy is appropriate. Taking the law into our own hands is inappropriate.

## Jacob finally responds

**Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I will be destroyed, I and my household." But they said, "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?"** (Genesis 34:30-31)

Jacob has remained silent throughout the story in places where he was expected to speak. He kept silent when he heard that Dinah had been raped. When Shechem and Hamor came to speak with Jacob, he didn't speak back. Instead, he let his sons speak for him, with disastrous results. Finally, he speaks. But he doesn't speak well.

Jacob's concern, in speaking with Simeon and Levi, is mostly for himself. In one verse, he uses a first-person pronoun—"I" or "me"—*seven* times. He's concerned with how this massacre could cause the people of the land to attack him, although he does at the end worry that this could also affect his household. He feared Esau in a similar vein (Genesis 32:11).

The narrator thus informs us of one reason why Jacob didn't take up his daughter's honor in the first place. He was worried that standing up for Dinah could have threatened his reputation with the Hivites and other Canaanites and thereby endangered the safety of his family. His daughter's honor was less important to him than his family's reputation, which he considered essential for its survival.

There is no concern, however, for how this slaughter represents the God of Abraham. Jacob says nothing about the rape of his daughter. There's no concern for how his sons made a mockery of circumcision, marriage and holy war. Finally, he offers no commendation for Simeon and Levi's quite proper moral

outrage at the rape of their sister.

Simeon and Levi, in their response to their father, show him that moral outrage is the appropriate response and that Jacob shamed himself by doing nothing. They say that Shechem “treated our sister as a harlot” by having sex with her and then offering payment. The words “our sister” are particularly poignant. Dinah’s brothers feel a familial connection with her, but her father does not.

Jacob’s silence in the first place and his speech in the second place are both shameful.

## **The price of passivity**

This story is a call to parents to be proactive in the lives of their children. In their formative years, we should be taking an active role in how they dress, who they spend time with and where they go. We are their teachers and their protectors so that they will be able to make good decisions on their own when the time comes.

Why do we sometimes assume a posture of passivity, even when we should be morally outraged? Because we think activity will cost us. Someone else’s honor is not as important to us as our safety, reputation and tranquility. We’d rather stay uninvolved because of where involvement might lead. Who knows how they’ll react to us, or what they’ll expect of us, if we enter the fray?

We know we should stand up, but we’re glued to our chairs. We know we should move into the light, but we hide in the shadows. We know we should speak, but we hold our tongues. That which is right takes a back seat to that which is convenient.

Often, we’re all too happy to abdicate our responsibility and let others speak and act in our place. We shouldn’t be surprised, therefore, when they speak and act poorly, with disastrous consequences, if it isn’t their place to do so. We think passivity will keep us safe, but it often comes with a price. The vacuum created by our passivity is filled by others with less noble intentions.

How many families and institutions, for example, have swept sexual abuse under the rug in order to protect their reputations? Obvious signs of abuse are ignored. Abuse becomes known, but the child is told to live with it and remain quiet. Like the three monkeys, we “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” Because no one speaks up, abuse is perpetuated, maybe even by the child who becomes a wounded adult and replicates what was done to him or her.

Pilate, the governor of Judea, knew that Jesus was innocent, but in order to keep the peace, he capitulated to the crowd and delivered Jesus up to be crucified (Matthew 27:22-26). He receded into passivity, kept the peace—for the time being—and crucified the Son of God.

If we assume a passive posture in life, we may find ourselves being shown up by others, even those who worship other gods, who are more than willing to act on what they believe. Jacob was shown up not only by his sons but also by the pagans.

Boy Dylan sings about two lovers: “You always said, ‘People don’t do what they believe in; they just do what’s most convenient; then they repent.’ And I always said, ‘Hang onto me, baby, and let’s hope that the roof stays on.’”(1) We repent, but only after doing what’s most convenient has blown up our face. We hang on, but sometimes the roof blows off.

When passivity backfires, its partner aggression often takes over. We act—rather, we

overreact—to compensate for our passivity or because now, finally, we feel threatened. Personal concern then takes precedence over concern for the gospel. We speak up, but for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way.

If Genesis 34 gives us no place for resting on laurels in the spiritual life and shows us the danger of passivity, how can we guard against a letdown? First, if passivity is our tendency, we must be aware of it. And if it's our tendency, we may be particularly susceptible after spiritual triumphs. Genesis 34 may be the wake-up call we need. Second, as always, we must give constant attention to our spiritual lives through regular involvement with the word, prayer and the people of God.

Enter the fray, and don't pull back from it even until your dying breath.

## The new Dinah

There is good reason to believe that the Samaritan village of Sychar, mentioned in John 4, is identical to Shechem (Genesis 33:19, 48:22; John 4:5-6). At the least, it was located near, if not on top of, Shechem. At Sychar, Jesus met a woman who, like Dinah, hadn't fared well at the hands of men. This place marked Jacob's failure as a father to his daughter. Hundreds of years later, a similar woman, who even called Jacob "our father," in the patriarchal sense, spoke with Jesus.

The woman asked him, "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are you, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" With Genesis 34 in the background, perhaps we should hear pain in this woman's voice. She would hope to meet someone greater than Jacob. In describing this interaction, John leaves it up to us to draw a conclusion that goes something like this: "Oh, dear woman, you have no idea. You have no idea how much greater Jesus is than Jacob."

Whereas Jacob's sons "came upon the city" and killed its men because one of them raped their sister, this woman urges the men of the city to "come" out of the city to meet Jesus. Indeed, they "went out of the city," and many came to believe in him. Jesus came to Sychar as the new and better Jacob to redeem its residents, and the new Dinah, and rewrite the ugly story of Genesis 34.

Is there a Shechem in your life? Like Dinah, have you been abused in some way? Like Jacob, have you paid a high price for your passivity? Like the sons of Jacob, did you take your own vengeance, and take it too far? Jesus wants to visit that place, bring healing to it and reclaim it for God.

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### NOTES:

(1) Bob Dylan and Sam Shepard, *Brownsville Girl* © 1986 Special Rider Music.

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Catalog No. 4878  
Genesis 34  
14<sup>th</sup> Message  
Scott Grant  
January 30, 2005





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