

**Genesis 34:1-31, No. 56****“Still Stumbling”****May 14, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Some time has passed. Jacob’s sons are adult men and the family is living in the Promised Land.

**Text Comment**

- v.1 That strange way of identifying Dinah “as the daughter Leah bore to Jacob” probably indicates “the emotional dynamics of the situation.” [Wenham] Being Leah’s daughter, she was not one of Jacob’s favorites. He was indifferent to her welfare. She found herself on her own to fend for herself. That she “went out” suggests more than a simple visit to greet her neighbors. She was looking for important things in the wrong place. But girls in that time and place would not normally go unchaperoned into a town. [Sarna, 233]
- v.2 The term “prince” or “chief” reflects historical reality. Hamor was not a king, but one tribal chief. Later he had to call a town meeting to get his plan approved. [Sarna, 234]
- v.4 Though his first act was deeply evil and a serious crime Shechem had formed a romantic attachment to Dinah. The Bible is very realistic about the mixture of motives behind human actions. It often acknowledges better impulses in evil men and evil impulses lying behind what would appear to be good deeds. Shechem’s blunt command to his father, however, does seem to indicate that he was a self-centered man who cared only to get his own way.
- v.5 Jacob seems throughout this episode appallingly indifferent to Dinah’s disgrace. He remained silent and waited until his sons came home and then left the matter to them.
- v.7 The sons seemed more concerned for the honor of the family than Jacob was. Notice the use of the name “Israel.” This is the first use of the name for the nation or the people.
- Now, what follows is a long dialogue containing the negotiations between Jacob’s sons and the Shechemites. Jacob himself plays no role. Everything is polite on the surface but we learn in v. 13 that Jacob’s sons were speaking deceitfully and in v. 17 that the Shechemites still held Dinah and had not returned her to her home. However much Shechem may have “loved” Dinah, he was willing to use her as a bargaining chip!
- v.10 The proposal of Hamor to consider the economic advantages of an alliance indicates the spiritual danger. He was proposing that Jacob’s family thoroughly integrate itself with the Canaanites.
- v.12 Probably two separate things were being offered: a gift for Dinah as compensation for the crime that was committed against her and a bride price for Jacob. Hamor and Shechem may be unwilling to apologize for what was done to Dinah but they are willing to pay generous compensation. [Sarna, 235]

- v.17 While Hamor had pointed to the economic advantages of intermarriage, Jacob's sons raised religious objections. Money was not the issue, but religious identity. This was clever on their part. Someone might well argue that economic development hardly required such a drastic step as universal circumcision, but everyone knows how inflexible people can be about their religious principles. Jacob's sons were, however, using a sacred rite to cover a vicious crime. [Waltke, 465-466]
- v.20 The demand that all the men be circumcised was hardly going to sit well with the other men of the town and so they needed to be persuaded that it is a good idea.
- v.24 Hamor and Shechem put the matter in terms of the interest of the community, not their personal desires. Some things never change! Calvin perceptively comments: "...it is a common disease that men of rank who have great authority, while making all things subservient to their own private ends, feign themselves to be considerate of the common good, and pretend a desire for the public advantage." [In Wenham, 314] Hamor and Shechem didn't care about the economic prosperity of everybody else, but they wanted certain things for themselves; they couldn't get them without the participation of the others.
- v.25 Simeon and Levi were Dinah's full brothers, sons of Leah. Jacob's indifference to Leah and her children – in such obvious contrast to his preoccupation with Joseph and Benjamin in the history that follows – may very well explain the violent overreaction of Simeon and Levi.
- v.29 The Shechemites planned to plunder Jacob's family and were plundered themselves.
- v.31 Jacob's response to the entire episode seems selfish and small-minded. He's only interested in the problems that his sons may have caused for himself. His sons scolded him for his lack of moral indignation. [Waltke, 467]

One might wish that the story of Jacob's return to the Promised Land had ended with the last verse of chapter 33. There we found Jacob, a man of faith, having returned to the land of his inheritance, reconciled to his brother, ready to take his rightful place as the head of the covenant family and heir of the promises God had made to Abraham. But the Bible is too honest and too realistic to have ended the story there! Just when we thought Jacob had at last turned a spiritual corner, just when all seemed to be going so well, the patriarch takes a header and once again, by his own unfaithfulness, places the spiritual welfare of his family - in jeopardy. However disappointing, it is Jacob's almost complete lack of spiritual leadership that is the presupposition of this entire episode.

The chapter begins with Dinah failing to keep a proper separation between herself and the pagan people of the land. That was Jacob's fault for neither seeing to her needs nor managing his home. The impression is left that Dinah was looking for happiness because her father was paying no attention to her needs. And that is what we observe of Jacob throughout. He didn't seem outraged by what had been done to his daughter. She was Leah's daughter and that made

Dinah a second-class citizen in her own home. At the end of the chapter the only concern Jacob could muster was for himself, that the actions of his sons might bring trouble down upon his own head. Jacob is presented to us here as an uncaring, irresponsible father and, sad to say, this is Jacob fresh from his encounter with God at Peniel.

We have already seen more than once in the history of this family that God would fulfill the promises he made to Abraham not *because of* the faithfulness of these men but *in spite of* their unfaithfulness, even in defiance of it. So it was when Jacob had to leave Canaan because of his reprehensible treatment of his father and his brother; so it was during his twenty-year-long sojourn in the east, and so it is now upon his return to the Promised Land. The gracious God kept covenant with an unworthy and sinful man who, in defiance of the immense blessings God had showered upon him, found ever new ways to betray his calling. And so it is everywhere in the Bible. God's people never get to the point where they keep their end of the covenant faithfully. We're finding here in Jacob at every turn, as throughout the book of Genesis, all the fundamental principles and truths of the Bible concerning the Christian life. We remain sinners to the end; so often ungrateful, so often disobedient; and in this way or that still so often disreputable. And that is why the wise, practiced Christian *never imagines* that he has mastered the Christian life. He knows only too well that he is nearly as far from true godliness on his last day as he was on the day he began his pilgrimage.

This is the overarching lesson of this chapter as it was of the ones before it and as it will be of the ones that follow. Our utter dependence upon the grace, the forgiveness, and the help of God, on *his faithfulness to his promises*, not on *our* faithfulness to them, will prove to be the unifying theme of all this material. But there are more specific lessons here as well. In the Bible there are two great subjects or themes: *what God is for man and what man is for God*. [Vos, *Grace and Glory*, 1] Jacob's dependence upon God's grace to remain in covenant with God, even here, so late in the story, belongs to "what God is for man." But alongside that theme is the other subject, the other half of religion, "what man is for God."

I want to draw your attention to two important biblical themes that concern our practice of faith and godliness, what we are to be for God, themes to which the Bible returns repeatedly throughout its pages and which are highlighted in this history. Alas, in both cases, the lesson is taught here in the negative, but no less the powerfully for that. If in some texts we learn to admire and imitate a man or woman's steadfastness in life and love and faithfulness, in others we learn to fear the consequences of spiritual weakness and infidelity by watching a believing man or woman fall. Things go wrong in Jacob's family here in chapter 34 because of a lack of faithfulness on Jacob's part. And that unfaithfulness takes two distinct and altogether common forms.

*I. In the first place, Jacob exposed himself and his family to danger, as does any Christian, by not promptly and whole-heartedly pursuing the life of faith and obedience before God.*

That is not said here so much as it is shown. But in the larger context the point is altogether clear. Jacob had taken a vacation from his pilgrimage; he was on a self-appointed spiritual sabbatical. His return to the Promised Land would not be complete until he had reached Bethel, where God had made over the promises of the covenant to Jacob personally, each of which God

had wonderfully kept, and where Jacob, in response, had set up a memorial pillar and made a vow that the very pillar he had set up would someday become a sanctuary, a house of God. And when God appeared to Jacob at the end of his sojourn in Paddan Aram he identified himself to Jacob as “the God of Bethel.” What is more, immediately after the disaster of chapter 34, the disgusting history we just read, the Lord ordered Jacob to go to Bethel, to settle there and to worship there. [35:1] It is impossible to avoid the implication that Jacob should never have stopped and settled at Shechem. Bethel should have been his destination and he should have been there long before this.

In other words, Jacob was not doing, in general, what he had promised God he would do. He was not where he ought to have been. He was dilly-dallying and because he was not pursuing his pilgrimage, because he was tardy in fulfilling his vow – after all that God had done for him and after his encounter with God at Peniel – he placed his family in moral jeopardy. He should have been at Bethel long before this. He should have already set up a more permanent sanctuary there in which to conduct the worship of God and to identify for his own family and for everyone around whose God these people were. But he was cooling his heels in Shechem and, so it appears, not *doing* much of anything.

This fundamental rule of Christian faithfulness and piety is taught and illustrated countless times in Holy Scripture. The best way to live the faithful Christian life, the best way to resist particular temptations, the best way to avoid spiritual falls and setbacks, the best way to keep the influences of the world upon your soul at bay, *is precisely to be hard at work doing what you are supposed to do.*

This is one of the lessons John Owen, the prince of 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan theologians, set before his young hearers – adolescent and teenaged boys in the chapel at Oxford University – in the sermons that eventually became his immortal work *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, perhaps the most valuable work ever written on that crucial subject. You cannot deal with sin *piecemeal*, said this master of the spiritual warfare. You have to deal with it *entire*. You cannot best your temptations one at a time, concentrating on one while leaving the others to wreak havoc in your heart and life. The only effective antidote to any temptation is a life of comprehensive obedience. Jacob, no doubt, continued to do some holy things and continued to obey some of God’s commandments – after all, his sons knew enough to call the family *Israel*; he was teaching them about faith in God – but the duties he left undone rendered him vulnerable to attack and the devil struck *and struck hard!*

The Christian life is and must be a life of warfare with sin. Jacob’s life is the proof of that ten times over. As Owen memorably put it: “be killing sin or it will be killing you.” [vi, 9] But the effort must be made over the entire field. You cannot leave the sins you love alone while devoting yourselves to the mortification of sins you don’t mind all that much giving up! You can’t work hard on your diet and leave alone your lusts or your anger or your love of money or your indifference to the needs of your neighbor! Nor can we work to put to death one sin at a time, while continuing to practice the others without any real effort to subdue or destroy them. I think if you will think about this carefully, you’ll find that we do this all the time. We take comfort from a partial obedience even while we often make virtually no progress at the point of the greatest danger. Hypocrites do this, of course, who come to church on Christmas and Easter

– a *very* partial obedience. But we do it as well, *real* Christians who want to love and serve the Lord.

Or, as Owen put it, in his ponderous but powerful English,

“Without sincerity and diligence in a universality of obedience, there is no mortification of any one perplexing [sin] to be obtained.”

His point was that it is precisely the spiritual momentum that a diligent, obedient, faithful life, busy at serving the Lord, I say it is precisely the momentum that such spiritual action imparts to a Christian life that gives it power over all sin and all temptation. It is when Christians slow down in the pursuit of God, when they stop thinking about the next thing they should do to serve and please the Lord, when they stop to rest on their pilgrimage that they are most vulnerable to a fall. Is that not what happened here?

Remember David? When did he fall? When did that catastrophe occur that ruined the second half of his married life and the second half of his reign? When did it happen? Well we are told. “In the spring, when kings go off to battle, David stayed in Jerusalem.” The whole tawdry, calamitous affair with Bathsheba would never have happened if David had only been busy doing the work God had called him to do. He was a king. He should have been at the head of his army. He stayed home and not only exposed himself to temptations that he otherwise would never have faced, but grew spiritually weak from lack of spiritual exercise. And so it was with Jacob. He paused at Shechem when he should have moved straight on to Bethel. No doubt he told himself he would only stay there for a time, that he was still on his way, but before he packed up his tents and began to move again he was blindsided by events for which he was totally unprepared and not only did many innocent men and women and children pay a terrible price, but further damage was done to his already divided home, division that was soon to cause him and others still greater pain.

The real experts in the spiritual warfare all tell us this: that we are never safer in regard to any temptation, never more unlikely to fall, never more sharp-sighted in our pursuit of holiness of life than when we are hard at work following the Lord and doing his will. Here is William Gurnall in his *The Christian in Complete Armor*. “Sins of commission are usual punishments for sins of omission. He that leaves a duty may soon be left to commit a crime.” And here is Richard Baxter: “A heart in heaven can reply to the tempter, as Nehemiah did, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come.”

Look, we all know that Jacob, fresh from Peniel and God’s wonderful deliverance of him and his family from Esau, did not intend to disgrace the Lord, expose his children to terrible temptations, further divide his family, and set back his own walk with God. He never intended any of that. But that is what happened, nevertheless, because, instead of keeping up the pace of his pilgrimage and going on to Bethel, as he had promised God he would, he paused at Shechem, long enough to buy some land and pitch his tent. He paused in his spiritual journey and all hell broke loose. You and I are tempted to do the same thing many times. Instead of taking that next step toward the Lord, doing that next thing we know would please him, serving him and others in his name, as our conscience tells us we ought to do, in that way that lies directly before us, we

sit down and put our feet up. Oh, we are intending to get moving soon, but we find, again and again, that it takes us much longer to get going again than we thought and *sometimes we never do* what we said we were going to do, what we had intended to do, before we took our spiritual nap.

*II. The second highly typical form of unfaithfulness that bedevils the believing life is the thoughtless exposure of the soul and the souls of one's family to the danger of absorption by the world.*

In general the world around us, the unbelieving world, what the New Testament calls the Devil's world, confronts Christians with a single alternative, though that alternative is described in different ways in different places in the Bible: separation or absorption, hostility or affection, fear or peaceful accommodation. The Canaanites, like most Americans today, were syncretistic. They were happy to absorb another family with that family's god, especially a prosperous family like Jacob's. They were supply-siders and believed in the "trickle-down effect." "A rising tide lifts all boats": that was their motto. They had no interest whatever in Jacob's god or his faith, but they were quite willing for Jacob to increase the economic activity in the area. They put out the welcome mat.

By not taking the careful steps that Abraham took to ensure that the children of the covenant married only in the Lord, to protect the purity and the distinctiveness of the covenant family, Jacob virtually assured that his children would not only mix with the surrounding culture but would become part of it. The result of that assimilation, of course, is never that the surrounding culture is purified, but rather that the Lord's people are compromised and corrupted. No don't mistake me. I'm not talking about the sort of separation from the world illustrated by the Amish. I'm talking about spiritual or religious separation, a careful preserving of the distinctive convictions and ways of life appropriate to the people of God. Obviously Canaan was populated with pagans and Jacob's family, wherever they lived in the Promised Land would be rubbing shoulders with those pagans. But it is not for nothing that the Bible uses such strong language to describe the preservation of covenantal distinctiveness: "friendship with the world is hatred toward God" (James 4:4), "you cannot serve both God and money" (Matt. 6:24), or "do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers...what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever....go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:14-17).

Typically, as Dr. Waltke puts it, the preservation of Christian distinctiveness, separation from the world while living in the world, requires "radical symbolization." That is, it requires Christians publicly to identify themselves as Christians, openly to declare and to embody their loyalty to Christ and to his kingdom. That is what Joseph will do later in Egypt and that is what Jacob did not do here. He could have made provision for Dinah to marry the right sort of man, but he did not. He could have set the family on a proper foundation by traveling on to Bethel and building a sanctuary there that would identify them with the Lord and with the covenant, but he did not. He allowed the line that divided his family from the culture around them to be blurred and once the line became indistinct, Dinah found it easy to cross that line and seek her companionship with the people who lived nearby. Defying all proper conventions she invited trouble and brought it down upon everyone's head.

Take a modern example. A young Christian joins the army. He finds himself at boot camp, in a barracks full of young men few of whom have any commitment to the Lord. Their speech is profane, their behavior coarse, their indifference to the great issues of life is worn on their sleeve. He assumes, and often correctly, that they will make a mockery of serious Christian commitment and behavior. He fears the estrangement and the scorn likely to result from his identifying himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. For years he knelt by his bed to say his prayers before bed. Will he do it now? In front of these fellows? If he does it nevertheless it will mean, of course, that having advertised himself as a Christian he will have to make good on his declaration and live a Christian life before his fellows because they will all be looking to see if he is all talk and no action.

Archaeologists have found a graffito on the wall of what was the barracks of the imperial pages in 3<sup>rd</sup> century Rome. It consists of a crude drawing of a boy, with hand upraised in an attitude of worship, before a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross. Underneath in a crude boyish hand are the words, "Alexamenos worships his God." One of the pages was a Christian and another boy was mocking his faith. However, not far away, written in another hand, are the words "Alexamenos is faithful." Perhaps that was Alexamenos' own response to the mockery or perhaps another boy had risen to his defense, impressed by the courage of his convictions. *That* is another form of radical symbolization, a way of nailing one's colors to the mast and so committing oneself to faithful and obedient service of our King. There are many ways to run one's colors up the flagpole but Jacob didn't choose a single one!

There are many ways for Christians to mix and mingle with unbelievers in ways that are absolutely proper and for purposes that the Lord approves: for friendship, for witness, to show mercy, to show kindness, and so on. But there are, at the same time, any number of ways in which Christians must always be demonstrating their distinctiveness, their difference from the world. Christian children must learn that they are the Lord's people not the world's people. They must imbibe that conviction of their separateness with their mother's milk. Terrible things happen when the difference between the people of God and the people of this world is not kept clear and is not understood and embraced by God's people. Parents, your calling is to explain why your children must be different and act differently than the people of this world, why it is their privilege to belong to a different people, a different community, and what a pity it is for anyone to belong to this world instead of the kingdom of God. As Samuel Rutherford put it in his quaint way in a letter to Lady Kenmure:

"Build your nest, Madam, upon no tree here, for God hath sold this whole forest to death." [Letter IV]

What we have been talking about this morning are the nuts and bolts of Christian living. We have said that real godliness and spiritual safety require that we live in constant forward motion, with an eye always open to the importance of preserving our distinctiveness as a people set apart to God. Nuts and bolts aren't the whole building, of course, but without them things always fall apart.