

CHAPTER 10

IN THE SHADOW
OF SHECHEM

Genesis 34

There's no way to make this chapter a pleasant one. No amount of makeup will cover the bruises.

No amount of paint will conceal the rot. No amount of perfume will disguise the stink. A silk purse out of a sow's ear? Not doable.

So be advised. This event in the life of Jacob is raw. The Shechem incident involved a sexual predator, widespread deceit, sacrilege, bloodshed, and genocide. Hardly the stuff of a Sunday school lesson. But certainly the tragic stuff of life.

Scripture is straightforward about the ugly underbelly of human nature. Left to our own devices, the human heart is a wicked thing. And because it is, history bears witness to dreadful events like the slaughter at Shechem.

It's a jagged-edged story, this one. Crude as a stone knife. Again, it's not easy to read, but the warning is hard to miss. *Don't settle for Shechem when the blessing is in Bethel.*

The command God gave Jacob in the homeland of Laban could hardly have been clearer. "I am the

God who appeared to you at Bethel, where you poured olive oil on the stone you set up on end and where you made a promise to me. Now I want you to leave here and go back to the land where you were born” (Gen. 31:13 NCV).

The itinerary was singular: journey to Bethel. There was no need for a layover, no instruction to stop short of the destination. Jacob’s daily to-do list contained one item: go to Bethel. Then how do we explain these two verses?

Jacob left Northwest Mesopotamia and arrived safely at the city of Shechem in the land of Canaan. There he camped east of the city. He bought a part of the field where he had camped from the sons of Hamor father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of silver. (Gen. 33:18–19 NCV)

Shechem was only twenty miles from Bethel.¹

Jacob had covered five hundred miles since fleeing Laban. He was within eyeshot of his goal. But he stopped short.

Why did he pitch his tent in the shadow of Shechem? Archaeological digs indicate that Shechem at this point in history was “an imposing fortified city. [Its] walls enclosed a city of about six acres and therefore was probably occupied by between five hundred and a thousand people.”² The city was an ancient commercial center at the crossroads of trade routes.

It’s easy to imagine Jacob and his nomadic clan, weary from travel, covered with road dust, thirsty for something other than water, and aching for conversation with someone other than family, deciding to pitch their tents. They stopped east of the Jordan in the highlands of Canaan. They met some Shechemites. They did some business. They made a few friends. They bought land.

He lived to regret each choice.

“At this time Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land” (Gen. 34:1 NCV). Dinah was around fifteen years of age.³ She was Leah’s seventh child, her youngest, and Jacob’s only daughter.

The result was the worst possible outcome: “When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the ruler of the land, saw her, he took her and forced her to have sexual relations with him” (Gen. 34:2 NCV).

Shechem was the son of the king. He bore the same name as the city. He was a scoundrel, a thug. His morals were lower than flounder droppings. Shechem kept Dinah in his house (v. 26). He became obsessed with her. He not only dishonored Jacob’s daughter, he told his father, “Get me this young woman as a wife” (Gen. 34:4). Such words could only be spoken by a chauvinistic chump.

News of the rape reached Jacob. “But since his sons were out in the field with the cattle, Jacob said nothing until they came home” (Gen. 34:5 NCV). Jacob said nothing?! We expect a Mount Saint Helen’s–level eruption. Not chilly apathy. Not cold callousness.

Dinah’s brothers weren’t so passive. When they heard what had happened, “they were very angry that Shechem had done such a wicked thing to Israel” (Gen. 34:7 NCV). This is the first use in Scripture of the name *Israel* to denote a community of people. The sons rightly saw the atrocity as an act against the people of God. Anger flashed in their eyes and pursed their lips.

Hamor, Shechem’s father, made an offer to the brothers.

“My son Shechem is deeply in love with Dinah. Please let him marry her. Marry our people. Give

your women to our men . . . take our women for your men . . . live in the same land with us . . . own land and . . . trade here.”

“Shechem also talked to Jacob and to Dinah’s brothers and said, ‘Please accept my offer. I will give anything you ask.’” (8–11 NCV)

There was no apology. No expression of regret. No statement of remorse. Instead, Hamor appealed to the brothers’ self-interest. You give Dinah to Shechem. We’ll give women to you. Make marriages among all people. Lots of picnics and parties. One big happy family.

And Jacob? Silent as death. At no point did he defend Dinah’s honor. We see no righteous anger. For goodness sake stand up for your daughter! Speak up for your family! Yet he did nothing. Was he actually considering intermarriage? Shechem was a Canaanite city! Jacob’s train was off the track. Dare he dismiss this act of raw misogyny?

Jacob’s sons didn’t. Their sister had been sexually violated. They weren’t going to sit by and do nothing. Simeon and Levi, blood brothers to Dinah, came forward with—what soon was apparent—one of the darkest and most nauseating plots in the Bible. They told Shechem and Hamor, “We cannot allow you to marry our sister, because you are not circumcised” (Gen. 34:14 NCV).

The act of circumcision was a holy deed, a designation of God’s chosen people. It was a symbol of faith. Simeon and Levi did not have a ritual on their minds, however. They had revenge.

Hamor and Shechem approached the men “who went out of the gate of his city” (v. 24), meaning the men who went to war on behalf of Shechem.⁴ They (astonishingly) convinced the soldiers to comply. They emphasized Jacob’s lack of aggression and completely omitted Shechem’s violation of Dinah. They promised financial

windfall. “If we do this, their cattle and their animals will belong to us” (Gen. 34:23 NCV). Lust. Rape. Deceit. Greed. Is there any redeemable moment in this story?

Good luck in finding it.

“Every male in the city was circumcised” (Gen. 34:24 NIV).

Three days later, when the Shechemites were in the pain of healing, Simeon and Levi armed themselves with torches, knives, swords, and bludgeons. The boys of Jacob “took their swords and made a surprise attack on the city, killing all the men there” (Gen. 34:25 NCV).

No house was spared. The soldiers of Shechem were silenced. Wives and daughters wailed. Children wandered through the streets. The sons of Jacob were covered in blood. Simeon, Levi, and their gang plundered the city. They took women captive. They kidnapped children. They stole live-

stock. They ransacked the shops of the merchants and the homes of the innocents.

What a visceral, despicable act.

And Jacob? Did he interrupt the plot? Attempt to stop them? Did he upbraid his sons? Did he demand that they return the stolen goods? No. To the very end of this chapter Jacob was, well, so Jacob. The same cussedness that caused Jacob to take advantage of Esau, trick Isaac, neglect Leah—that same amnesia of God led him once again to think only of himself.

Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have caused me a lot of trouble. Now the Canaanites and the Perizzites who live in the land will hate me. Since there are only a few of us, if they join together to attack us, my people and I will be destroyed.”

But the brothers said, “We will not allow our sister to be treated like a prostitute.” (Gen. 34:30–31 NCV)

Jacob placed his own safety higher than that of his daughter. In the end he was just as guilty as Shechem. As for Dinah, she never said a word. She was nothing more than a pawn in an alpha struggle.

And God? No one calls on him for wisdom. No one prays for strength. And, accordingly, Jacob is not called Israel. He has been given a new name, but he acts out of his old nature.

And so the story ends. What a distressing, depressing oil spill of a chapter. No heroes. No inspiration. It's not go-to material for feel-good sermons. Give us the Twenty-third Psalm. Give us the Sermon on the Mount. Give us Easter Sunday or Pentecost. We find inspiration in those events.

We find depravity in this one. Why is it included in Scripture?

Simple. We need the reminder. Apart from God's help, we are a disaster.

The human heart is a dark place. “Sin lurks deep in the hearts of the wicked, forever urging them on to evil deeds” (Ps. 36:1 TLB). “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9 NIV).

The slain men of Shechem, the ruthlessness of the brothers, the blood of their butchery, the inertia of the father—they all combine to remind us of a fundamental message: When God is not sought, when the new nature is suppressed, when society submits to no one higher than self, the result is chaos. We become savages. We victimize the vulnerable. We break hearts, homes, covenants, and promises.

We create a poisoned system.

A poisoned system is one where people suppress their better selves and rise on the backs of others. It is one that awards power and force and downplays kindness and grace. Toxic cultures generate tribes and thrive on distrust. Societies like Shechem create underlings who appear less than human, undesirable, unworthy, and fearsome.

Shechem was a toxic culture.

Jacob and his sons inhaled the toxins.

Was it just a chapter ago that Jacob saw angels, wrestled with God, received a new name and a restored relationship with Esau? And now this. From the peak to the pit in the turn of a page.

How quickly the heart turns dark.

To be clear, in the Christian calculus, humanity is treasured, priceless, and destined for glory. We are created in God's image. We are endowed with fellowship and invited into eternal rest.

But we have squandered our inheritance by seeking to be God.

We have pitched our tent in the shadow of Shechem.

How else do we explain the corruption of the world? For all our medical and scientific advancements, for all our breakthroughs in technology and medicine, do we not battle the same inclinations as did our Bronze Age ancestors? Women are still objectified: almost one in three women worldwide, ages fifteen to forty-nine, is a victim of physical and/or sexual violence. One in three!⁵

How is it that the twentieth century was the most murderous in history? Wars and genocides took more than 200 million victims in one hundred years! As we save more people than ever before, we find ways to slaughter more people than ever before. Consider the Sudanese massacre of the 1990s. The atrocities of Nanking, the So-

viet Gulag, Auschwitz, and the Cambodian killing fields. The Rwandan bloodbath saw the deaths of more than 800,000 Tutsis in less than three months. “It was the equivalent of more than two World Trade Center slaughters every single day for one hundred days straight.”⁶

According to Jesus this inclination to violence is not a problem of borders and broken treaties. It is a matter of the heart. “Out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matt. 15:19 NIV).

Heaven’s assessment of the human condition is not a favorable one. In fact, it brings to mind a prognosis the doctor gave me five days ago.

Let me describe the setting in which I’m writing this chapter and see if you can guess the name of my affliction. I’m in a downstairs room of my house. I’ve ascended the stairs only for medicine

and bedtime. I’ve had no face-to-face interaction with anyone but my wife, and she’s wearing a hazmat suit.

Have you guessed it? Yep, COVID-19. At some point I inhaled a piece of a pandemic. My throat hurts. My body aches. My fever has spiked. My stomach churns. My name was added to the list I’d tried so hard to avoid.

We all struggle with an unseen, yet fatal, virus. Not of the body, but of the soul. Not COVID, but sin. We’ve all tested positive. We’re all infected. Left untreated “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23 NIV).

It ruptures our relationship with God. Rather than seek him, we deny him. Rather than love his children, we hurt them.

But there is a treatment! These were the doctor’s words to me five days ago. He’d scarcely told me that I was sick before he began telling me

about something called immunotherapy. “We infuse you with antibodies. We regenerate your sick system with healthy cells.”

If that’s not an illustration of God’s cure for sin, then I’ve misunderstood the meaning of the word *gospel*. Jesus took on our sin, our COVID-19 of the soul. He, the only virus-free being in human history, allowed himself to be infected with the human condition.

He took the punishment, and that made us whole.

Through his bruises we get healed. (Isa. 53:5 THE MESSAGE)

[Christ] never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. (1 Peter 3:18 NLT)

In order to treat my infection, the physician at-

tached me to an IV bag of healthy cells. In order to treat our sin, our Good Father infused and infuses us with the purest life: “It is no longer I who live,” Paul proclaimed, “but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20 NLT).

Coursing through the vein of the saint is the sinless, disease-blocking, life-giving transfusion of Christ. “The blood of Jesus . . . purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7 NIV).

God gives us what the doctor gave me: an honest assessment of my condition and a gracious provision to treat it.

But my doctor wasn’t finished. “Lucado,” he said, “if you want to get better, and if you don’t want to spread this, you’ve got to get drastic. Quarantine for ten days.”

So here I sit. Day five of utter boredom. Time passing slower than gums receding. But a serious condition calls for serious vigilance.

Doesn't sin require even more caution?

What is your Shechem? What temptation keeps you from Bethel? What voices seduce you? Distract you? Lure you away from your destiny?

To be clear, if you have the gift of Christ in your heart, you are set for life. Sin cannot destroy you. But it can trip you, ensnare you, entangle you. It cannot take your salvation, but it can take your joy, peace of mind, and rest.

Don't do what Jacob did. Don't engage in business where you have no business being. Get drastic. Walk a wide circle around the city. Shut off the internet. Give away your credit cards. Join AA. Cancel your trip to Vegas, New York City, or wherever it is you were planning to resort to your youth. Change your phone number. Break up with her. Stop seeing him. Don't pitch your tent in the shadow of Shechem.

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.
Keep your mouth free of perversity;
keep corrupt talk far from your lips.
Let your eyes look straight ahead;
fix your gaze directly before you.
Give careful thought to the paths for your feet
and be steadfast in all your ways.
Do not turn to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil. (Prov. 4:23–27 NIV)

Jacob got out. He realized that if they stayed, the Canaanites, who were much larger in number, would retaliate and kill his entire household. He pulled up stakes, loaded his camels, and turned toward Bethel. When he did, guess who was waiting for him? You've going to love the [next chapter](#). To the degree that Shechem was sordid, Bethel was beautiful. But Jacob had to make a change.

Do likewise. Don't stop in Shechem when the blessing is in Bethel.