

The Problem of Vengeance

Genesis 34

Introduction

Many of us are familiar with the great story by Alexander Dumas titled, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The novel is about Edmond Dantes, whose success earns him three conspiring enemies. They write a letter falsely incriminating him in a revolutionary plot. These three enemies are Danglars, Fernand Mondego, and Caderousse. Danglars will become captain of the Pharaon once Dantes is removed, Fernand aspires to win Mercedes' love, and Caderousse is a jealous neighbor of Dantes. The denunciation fallen into the hands of the public prosecutor, Monsieur de Villefort. He has Dantes incarcerated as a most dangerous criminal, throwing him into the Chateau D'If. After 14 years, Dantes escapes from prison through a series of events that bring him to know one, Abbe Faria, who teaches Dantes all his vast knowledge of literature, the sciences and languages and the location of an immense treasure on the Isle of Monte Cristo. When the Abbe dies, Dantes replaces his body with the Abbe's.

Dantes' only reason for living now is to have vengeance upon those who threw his life away. These men deserve to suffer. Their downfall shall be all the more destructive if his revenge is not brash, but calculated. Over the next ten years, Monte Cristo retrieves the treasure, conditions himself, and learns all about his enemies. Then he begins to exact revenge. He believes his duty to act as divine justice. So, he reenters Parisien society and playing on each man's weakness, he systematically exposes, destroys or kills each one. Thus, the Count's revenge is now complete. He has succeeded in his quest for slow revenge. His enemies have suffered for their sins. He had assumed the role of Providence by destroying all that had been built by his enemies during his long years of imprisonment. Dumas is intent on drawing us in to root on the hero until we see the dire effects, the dust and ashes left after the burning fire of vengeance. Here was a man who had been terribly sinned against whose cause was even just. But the sweetness of each act of revenge began to sour in his mouth and left him weary and smitten in conscience.

Sometimes our own lives are like this. We are a people who have been sinned against, sometimes as children and often as adults. Many of you have been abused as children, taken advantage of as teens or sinned against at home, at work, at school. Some of us have even experienced being sinned against by Christian peers or leaders. We may have played out scenes of justice or even revenge in our heads, long tasty scripts of setting things right or getting even that lie in our hearts like dark and destructive tales. And maybe some of you have acted on those thoughts.

The Bible was written for our illustration and our instruction. You do not experience life in a way that is unique to you alone. The Bible is full of people who have been sinned against in horrible ways. The Bible is full of right and wrong responses to those terrible deeds.

We are faced here with a tangled web of sin, weakness, unbridled anger, deception and vengeance. These intermingled issues make a difficult situation impossible. This is one of two texts in this portion of Genesis whose purpose is difficult. It seems to be a break in the flow of the text, an interlude. But, if we are guided by Moses' developing purpose and themes rather than being tied to a structure, I think we can see what we are to learn.

At the heart of Genesis 34 is grave problem with exacting vengeance.

A Wicked Defilement

(v.1-12)

After reconciling with Esau, Jacob and his clan settle into the land. They are consolidating their wealth and establishing themselves on their own land. Jacob has purchased the land from Hamor and seems to be dwelling in peaceful coexistence (33:19). While this might not appear to be significant, God had told them to go on to Bethel and settle there. The consequences of settling here are going to be very severe.

Its Terrible Cause

(v.1-4)

Dinah is where she ought not be. She is associating with the Canaanite women. She has gone out to see them. She seems to be curious. But the Canaanite women were wicked and immoral. All through the Old Testament, we find warning after warning against these women. But they captivate her. So she may not mean harm – she may be being drawn. But her action is unwise, even if her intent is innocent.

She goes to see and there she is seen. Shechem, the son of Hamor and the prince of the ruling tribe of the area sees her. Shechem lusts after her. In his lust, he forces her and rapes her. There is no question of it being forced. And he has humiliated her. Having debased her and violated her, she now has little hope of a good marriage.

However, in a not unusual turn, his heart softens toward her and he falls in love with her. Moses does not seem to question the authenticity of his love for her. The parallelism here is significant. He now speaks tenderly to her, wooing her and wanting to marry her.

One Hebrew scholar notes that Moses presents the three main sets of verbs in opposition to one another:

He	took	lay	defiled
He	clave	loved	spoke kindly

Thus, the first set of verbs serve to highlight the wickedness of Shechem and justify the anger of Jacob's sons. The second set serve to soften the harshness and hardness, the "grimness" of the crime. It is seeming to say that Shechem acted out of a wild consuming love. [cited in Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, p.573]

Its Weak Response

(v.5-7)

The report of this assault comes to Jacob. Jacob's response to the rape of his daughter is indifference. He learned of it and since the kids are not around, he made no effort challenge nor charge Shechem with the crime.

When Jacob's sons arrive from the field having heard of what happened, they are incensed. Initially they have a righteous anger. This ought not to have been done. It is a wicked thing. They are angry at her being defiled. They are going to seek justice. Maybe Dinah should not have been where she was; but Shechem's crime is inexcusable.

Moses is also highlighting the bland, weak response of Jacob. He is not acting with godly patient wisdom. He is acting with cowardly weak indecision. He may not really even care. After all, Dinah is the daughter of Leah. One wonders if his reaction would have been different if she had been Rachel's daughter. His indifference and lack of righteous indignation arise from his heart, from the what he believes and what he wants. He is not going to raise a fuss. He wants peace. Dinah is not prized. So, Jacob is not seeking justice. The effect is that in the absence of leading his sons well to seek what is right, he leaves them without direction and they move from seeking justice to seeking vengeance.

Its Proposed Solution

(v.8-12)

Jacob is approached with a proposal for marriage. Now, imagine your response to a young, rich son of the most powerful person in your community who has forced your daughter and now father and son are proposing a marriage. Yet, in this text, Jacob does not even respond – it is his sons who will speak up.

Hamor proposes a union in marriage that will affect a union of families (v.8-10). He is proposing intermarriage, land-sharing and commerce. Rather than being two tribes headed toward possible contention over this terrible event, he is seeking to unite the tribes through marriages so that they will become one. He makes his appeal aiming at Jacob's desire for prosperity and for peace.

Shechem also proposes marriage (v.11-12). He is seeking to make amends, gain favor through paying whatever bride price Jacob wants to set. It was (and still is in many cultures) a custom that the father of the bride was paid a bride price. Usually it was negotiated based on the ability of the groom to pay. However, a father could declare the great value he set on his daughter by the price he set. Here Shechem is willing to pay almost anything to marry Dinah. Wonder what Jacob thought – Moses does not record his response.

God's people are being warned of the grave dangers and enticing temptations when we mingle with pagans in a wrong way. Jacob's settling down in the midst of this pagan land in disobedience to God exposed his family to pagan influence and personal failure. Dinah's fascination with the Canaanite women exposed her to the defiling lust of a pagan young man. In the absence of decisive and righteous leadership, the boys who are late teenagers and early twenty-somethings, allow their anger to control them and drive them in vicious violence.

Israel must be alert to danger the Canaanite pagans pose as they enter the land. We must be alert to defilement in our interaction with the pagan culture around us. We do not live in a Christian society – outside of the church, even moral people are still pagan by Biblical standards. Let us be oh so cautious as we live among the world that we do not become like the world even as we seek to win the world.

A Treacherous Deceit

(v.13-24)

In the absence of a clear and decisive answer from Jacob, his sons enter the negotiation and launch a treacherous deceit.

Its Cunning Proposal

(v.13-17)

Moses portrays this as a cunning proposal. It was deceit from the beginning. We do not know at this point the extent of the plan. We do know that they took advantage of the situation. With cunning and devious intent, they make a counter proposal. If Hamor and his clan want to be united with Jacob and his clan, then all of the males must be circumcised. If they are willing to do this, then the deal can go forward. If not, they will leave and take Dinah with them, the deal is off.

This betrays a deep lack of respect for spiritual things. The rite of circumcision was certainly the mark of being a son of Abraham. It was how one identified oneself or ones male children in the tribal lineage. They are basically calling on Hamor and his clan to be absorbed into Jacob's. Being circumcised would not mark the merging of the clans, but rather the absorption of one by the other. But, they had no intention of keeping the promise. They were willing to take this rite, invested by God with sacred meaning, and use it to serve their vengeful agenda. Like Jacob in his youth, these sons of the schemer are themselves disregarding what is holy and scheming for their own ends.

Its Dishonest Presentation

(v.18-24)

Jacob's sons are not the only deceivers in this proposal. Hamor and Shechem have their own agenda. What is not clear is whether the arguments presented to the men of their city and clan represent their true agenda or they are making a dishonest presentation. It seems to me that, both are true. Their true agenda is to gain control of Jacob's people and prosperity. The only way to get the clan to go along will be to dangle that as an incentive. Moses is showing these pagan men, even when they accept the rite of circumcision, to be acting in their own interests, not serving God's interests. Thus, no descendent of Hamor nor any Canaanite can point back to this agreement and their accepting circumcision to make a claim to either protection or provision as Israel moves in conquest.

O Shechem is ready to move now. He delights in Dinah. He has great standing with the people. He is respected and admired. So, he and his father go to the gate of the city where they convene a meeting of the men of the city. There they make their presentation. Their arguments are heart exposing while being deceiving at the same time. Here are the arguments:

We are living at peace together now – so unification is possible and desirable.

The land here is large enough and fruitful enough for us all – so there will be no trouble with sharing the resources.

We will become the owners of all they have if this marriage takes place.

But, there is a condition – every male has to be circumcised or they are not going to agree to the marriage. I am trying to imagine being Joe Smith in Hamor's clan being told that if I, as an adult male, will be circumcised then his son can marry this woman, unite the tribes and make me wealthy. Do I believe this? Do I think this is worth it? It may be a measure of the wickedness of these pagans that they would consider this for what it will gain them.

Moses records that all the males who “went through the gate” were circumcised. This means that not only the inhabitants of the city itself, but its surrounding suburbs and farms as well as outlying villages doing trading in the city. Every able bodied man was taken, circumcised and laid up for a period of healing.

A Vengeful Destruction

(v.25-31)

Now the plans the brothers had hatched wrecks a vengeful and violent destruction.

Its Terrible Slaughter

(v.25-29)

On the third day, when Hamor's clan would be sorest and weakest, Dinah's two oldest brothers, Simeon and Levi, attack the city. They slaughter Hamor, Shechem and all the men. They took the city, capturing all the women and children. They seized all their livestock and harvest. They totally plundered the land. Everything was taken. Nothing was left. In their own eyes, this vengeance was warranted and just for Shechem had “defiled their sister.”

Then, in one short phrase, a stunning surprise awaits the reader. They “took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away.” (v.26). Is this what you would expect? Dinah has, all along, been kept in Shechem's home! This negotiation has not been taking place with Dinah safely secured in her own tent with Jacob's clan. Now, we have to surmise then that she was being held not at her own will. Does this not explain her brother's a bit more? Does it not make Jacob's silence all the more appalling?

Is their response a righteous application of justice or a vicious application of vengeance? If Shechem had been the only one to die, I believe this would have been justice. But they have wiped out a whole tribe's males. They have done so through a deceit and without regard to their participation. Certainly, Moses implies that the men of the city approved of Shechem's actions, both by entering the agreement and by the high regard in which they held him even after his crime.

Further, the justice of God is not exercised through deceit and manipulation. Vengeance is an ugly master that will bring any excuse and rationale to serve its terrible purposes.

Its Troubling Responses**(v.30-31)**

Now Jacob speaks. Imagine that! He does not intervene or speak up in behalf of his daughter, but he condemns the sons for their actions? Should he have? Yes, certainly. But notice why he does so – not because their actions were wrong, but because of the consequences their actions may possibly bring. The phrasing is interesting here, “You have made me a stink to my neighbors.” He is concerned about the opinion of the pagans and the possible destruction by them.

Brothers and sisters, not if God’s promises are true. Yes, he may be a stink for neither acting in justice nor restraining his sons’ vengeance. But he cannot and will not be destroyed. He is the son of promise and the father of the promised. This is doubt and possibly denial of God’s promises and purposes.

Look at their accusation, “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” This accusing sword is two-edged. Should Hamor and Shechem get away with treating Dinah like a whore? No. And here is the second cut, why are you, Jacob, treating her like someone to be bought and sold to secure your place? Doesn’t that just make you a pimp? Your own daughter?

But make no mistake, God is still at work.

The Canaanites are exposed as the pagans they really are. Sometimes God allows wicked people to act in visibly wicked ways so that we will have no choice but to have a Biblical assessment.

Jacob’s disobedience, his weak and indecisive leadership and possibly an uncaring heart, are exposed. The results are devastating in his family. Where a mature and God-pleasing justice ought to govern, fear, weakness and craving for peace wrought havoc.

The Israelites learn a great lesson. While the pagans around them may commit terrible crimes, even in sinning against one of their own, they are not free to act any way they choose. God will eventually authorize the kind of destruction of the Canaanites that Simeon and Levi had wrought, but not yet.

Lessons

So this brings me to challenge you in several ways.

WE ARE TOO COZY WITH THE WORLD AROUND US. Because we view our neighbors as cultured, kind, helpful, useful people – yes, they are lost, but – we sometimes are blurring the line between believer and unbeliever. That coziness on our part as parents and grandparents sometimes leads to curiosity and fascination in our sons and daughters with terribly dangerous consequences. We are to win the lost to Christ – we not to lose ourselves to the lost.

IN THE MIDST OF BEING SINNED AGAINST, WE MUST NOT SEEK VENGEANCE. Most of what you face is personal and individual being sinned against. It may even be of the class of crime and sin as against Dinah. God has provided the means of justice. If that means of justice, the government we are under fails, then we must not seek vengeance. We must commit ourselves to the long-term justice of God – a justice that will eventually mete out God's punishment. Leave room for that.

WE NEED HUMBLE, STRONG, DECISIVE, CHRIST-LIKE, GOD-FEARING, RIGHTEOUS, BIBLE BELIEVING AND OBEYING LEADERSHIP. I am deeply concerned that Christian leadership has gone down slope two ways: (1) we are so insipid, weak and spineless that we will even allow the core doctrines and holiness of the church to be compromised with little real reaction; or (2) we are so domineering, dictatorial, unkind and un-Christlike that we lose our sense of humble, servant-like, measured leadership and the core doctrines and holiness of the church are diminished, disdained and denied.

CLING TO CHRIST WHOSE LOVE FOR US AND TREASURING OF US ALWAYS CAUSES HIM TO SUPPORT US, DEFEND US AND HONOR US. We must rest in the reassurance that His own faithfulness and favor are us, His bride, His beloved.

