

**SOVEREIGN GRACE
PROVOKES THE WICKED
Genesis 37:1-11**

Please review this weeks catechism question.

Did you have the opportunity to meet anyone new at last Sunday's worship service?

INTRODUCTION

What do the plots of the original "Star Wars" trilogy, "Lord of the Rings", the book of Genesis and the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) share in common? CLUE: (See Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3, 37:1, Isaiah 53:1-3, Luke 2: 48-51, 18:34, Acts 1:6.)

In each instance the "salvation" of the entire world/universe depends upon one or at most a few ordinary individuals. In Star Wars the survival of a democratic federation depends upon a sulky teenager, Luke Skywalker and his friends. In Lord of the Rings, all the races of Middle Earth depend upon an ordinary hobbit named Frodo Baggins and a few of his friends. In the gospels, the salvation of the world from sin and death depends upon an unknown; "ordinary" carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus. In the book of Genesis, the salvation of the world depends upon a nomadic shepherd named Abraham and his nomadic descendants, including a 17-year-old teenager, named Joseph.

The book of Genesis begins on a cosmic scale with the creation of the universe, the planet earth and the living organisms that inhabit it. The creation of human kind in the image of God is the high point in the creation account. After the sin of Adam and Eve, the story revolves around the question of how is God going to rescue his people and his creation from the curse of sin and death. Beginning in Genesis 12 the answer to that question focuses in upon one very ordinary man, Abraham and his descendants. No one would ever guess that the most significant thing God was doing in the entire universe was being done in and through this family. These eleven verses, 37:1-11, describing one 17-year-old shepherd boy and his family, give us the pattern for how it is that God goes about the work of saving the world.

STUDY

1. Compare Genesis 36 with 37:1-11. If you did not know anything about the story leading up to these passages, which brother, Esau or Jacob, would you pick as the one whose family was going to have the greatest influence in the world?

If you had no knowledge of what has come before this it would seem that Esau and his family were far more influential than Jacob and his family. Esau's sons are chiefs and kings and Jacob's sons hate each other. They're just a bunch of quarreling shepherds who own no land, not tribal chieftains or kings.

2. Together summarize the story of how Jacob came to have 4 wives and twelve sons. Refer to Genesis 29:16-30:24 & 35: 16-26 if you need help.

Jacob served Laban, his father-in-law for seven years in order to marry Rachael, whom he loved very much. However, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his older, ugly daughter, Leah. He then required Jacob to work another seven years to have Rachael as his wife. He did give her to him at the beginning of the seven years. Jacob loved Rachael more than he loved Leah. Rachael could not have children but Leah bore him six sons. In the competition between the two women they both gave Jacob their maidservants as concubines (2nd, lower status wives) and he had two sons by each of these women. Finally Rachael had a son, Joseph after Leah and the concubines had given him 10 sons. Then, many years later, Rachael had another son, Benjamin. However, she died in childbirth. Jacob and Leah's oldest son, Reuben, then raped Rachael's maidservant, Bilhah.

3. What kind of impression do you have of this family?

This family is definitely messed up. It is full of jealousy, bitterness, immorality, hatred, and competition. This is not a family that would ever be picked for an interview on James Dobson's program, "Focus on the Family".

4. Read 37: 2-11. What do we find out about Joseph? (Concentrate on the facts, not what you think the facts mean.)

Joseph is a young man of 17. He is helping the four sons of his father's concubines shepherd a flock of sheep. For a reason we are not told he gives to his father a bad report about these four sons. Jacob loves Joseph more than all his other sons. He even makes him a special robe for him that he does not make for the brothers. His brothers hate him for his special status in the family. Their hatred is so intense that they are not able to even speak a kind word to him. They mock, curse, criticize and condemn him at every opportunity. Joseph has two dreams, both of which he tells to his brothers. The second one he also reports to his father. In both of the dreams, Joseph's family bows down to him. Everyone sees the dreams as communicating that Joseph is going to rule over his family. This causes the brothers to hate him more and even his father rebukes him.

5. Based upon what you know about Joseph from these verses, what kind of a person is he? What is he like? Why do you think this?

When he brings the bad report to his father about his brothers, is he simply being a tattletale or is he standing for the truth? We aren't even told that the report is the truth. In fact, the Hebrew word usually refers to a false report. Then there is the troubling favoritism of his father. Doesn't it strike you as unfair that Jacob loves Joseph more than his other sons and openly flaunts his favoritism by giving Joseph specially tailored clothing? The hatred of the brothers may be wrong but we can at least understand it. Then there is Joseph's reporting his dreams to his brothers. He appears to be a spoiled kid who loves to rub his brother's noses in his favored position. It would be easy to read the story, viewing Joseph as an arrogant kid who is only getting what he deserves from his brothers. Joseph, it appears, is infected with an inflated sense of self and loves to provoke his brothers with his favored position.

6. There is another way to read this story. What do each of the following clues indicate about what is really happening in this story?

A. Joseph is the youngest of the original eleven brothers (Benjamin is probably a toddler at this time). How is he similar to Isaac and Jacob and what does this suggest?

Throughout Genesis the pattern has been that the younger son has been the chosen son. Isaac was chosen whereas his older half-brother Ishmael was rejected. Jacob was chosen, while the older twin Esau, was rejected. It fits the pattern for Joseph, the youngest of the first eleven sons, to be chosen by God to carry on the promises.

B. The Hebrew of v. 2 could read, "Joseph was shepherding his brothers among the sheep". The brothers are the four sons of the maidservants, the least of the brothers (see list in 35:25-26)

Joseph's bringing the report to his father would seem to indicate that Joseph wasn't along to help them but he was there to supervise them. His reporting to his father was his duty as his father appointed him as the supervisor of this part of the shepherding operation. In other words, he was in charge of the brothers.

C. Reuben, the true "firstborn" son raped one of Jacob's wives (35:2). "Ornamented robe" is used in 2 Samuel 3:18 to describe the clothing worn by one of King David's daughters. Joseph is the firstborn son of Rachael, Jacob's "true" wife.

Reuben forfeited his rights as the firstborn by this wicked act. As the firstborn of one of the two main wives, Joseph should have the firstborn rights when Reuben disqualifies himself. Jacob's favoring of Joseph is not simply the sentimentalism of an old man who is lonely for his favorite wife but a determined plan to give Joseph, who is the firstborn son of Rachael, the position and privileges of the firstborn son. It is God's will that Joseph inherit the rights of the firstborn. Joseph's privilege and position are his legitimate right, not an unjust usurping of the position of the other brothers.

D. Every other dream reported in Genesis is explicitly said to come from God (20:3ff, 28:12ff, 31:10ff, 31:24ff, 40:5ff & 41:7ff). These dreams are exactly fulfilled in the chapters that follow.

God gives the two dreams that Joseph has to him. Now I know it doesn't say that directly, but God gives every other dream reported in the book of Genesis. The story that follows is a specific fulfillment of the dreams. There is no reason to think this dream has any other source than God. This means that these dreams are the revelation of God's will and God's plan to save his people.

- E. The verb "Listen" that Joseph uses in v. 6 is a command and is used hundreds of times by the OT prophets when they speak to the Israelites ("Listen to what the Lord says"). In Numbers 12:6 the Lord says to Moses, Aaron and their sister Miriam, "Listen to my words, 'When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams.'"

The language that Joseph uses in reporting his dream is the language used by Moses and the prophets when they announce the content of their dreams to the people of Israel. What possible benefit would Joseph get from telling these dreams to his brothers? All he gets for telling his brothers is more abuse. He even incurs the wrath of his father for telling his dreams. He is treated just like Moses and the prophets when they reported God's words to the people of Israel. Joseph is speaking for God when he announces his dreams.

- F. The last clause in v. 11 says, "but his father kept the matter in mind." Why did Jacob do this?

He remembers promises that were spoken to him that made family members mad. His mother was told before his birth that he, the younger son, would rule over his older brother. He was given his father's blessing, part of which says, "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you." Jacob hears in Joseph's dreams a repetition of the promises made to him and so while he does not like the idea of bowing down to his son, he recognizes that this may indeed be God's plan. It's just hard to accept when the one telling you God's will is your 17-year-old son.

7. What is really going on in this story? What does this tell us about how God works to save his people? Especially compare Joseph and his

brothers to Jesus and his ministry among the descendants of these 10 brothers.

God's ways are not man's ways. God's plan of salvation is not going forward through Edom with their kings and chieftains but through a family riddled with sin and a 17-year-old shepherd boy. This is always the way that God's work goes forward. God chooses the weak things of the world and the despised so that everyone will know that salvation is from the Lord, not from men. The most powerful human being to ever live was a Jewish carpenter who grew up in a backwater town, in a "middle of nowhere" province, in an insignificant country. No one knew who Jesus was, just like no one knows who Joseph really is. Jesus was his Father's only loved Son, just as Joseph is his father's beloved son. Jesus, while he came in humility is the king of kings and lord of lords. He was clothed with power from on high. Just as Joseph is the youngest and yet has the authority of the firstborn. Jesus spoke God's revealed truth and was hated by all who heard him except for a few who kept the things he said in mind, just like Joseph is hated by his family, except for his father who keeps what he said in mind. God doesn't choose the rich and powerful to advance his kingdom, but the lowly and the unnoticed. The kingdom of heaven really is like a mustard seed that is the smallest seed you plant but it becomes the biggest plant in the garden. No one would have ever predicted that Joseph would become the second most powerful person in the world of his day. Yet, that is what happened.

8. What are the ways that Joseph's godliness, faith and love for his family are being portrayed in this passage?

We see Joseph's godliness in his fulfilling his duty to watch over his brothers and his willingness to endure their wrath by reporting their misconduct to his father. We see his suffering love in his enduring his brothers' spiteful speech day in and day out, even though he did not deserve to be treated like this. He announced his dreams to his brothers not because he was trying to rub his special status in their faces but because he knew these dreams were from God and that the word of God is given for the people of God. The evidence that Joseph is godly and seeking to love his brothers is seen in his willingness to endure their hostility and abuse without retaliating. There is no reason for Joseph to report these dreams other than love for God and for his family. He's

not so stupid as to think that telling these dreams is going to gain him their favor, unless God himself breaks through into their lives, giving them the gift of repentance and faith. Joseph chose, because he loved God and loves people, to endure the hostility of sinful men against himself by living a godly life and courageously declaring the good news of God's saving work.

God's way of saving the world is rarely noticed because God chooses the ordinary, the weak, the sinful and the world hates God and the ordinary people who speak for him.

9. How would you describe his brother's reaction to Jacob's rightful authority and loving proclamation of God's word?

They are jealous and filled with rage. They cannot understand why Joseph is the chosen one. They don't see God's representative. They see him as an arrogant, spoiled kid who has no right to tell them what to do or to have the privileges that have been given to him.

10. How is the message of Jesus to the descendants of these 10 brothers and their response similar to Joseph's message and the response of his brothers? Read John 8: 12-26 & 48-59.

What we see happening to Joseph here is the pattern of response to God's message and his messengers throughout the biblical record and to this day. In John 8 Jesus says to the descendants of these men, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Later he said, "You are from below. I am from above. I told you that you would die in your sins if you do not believe that I am God and the agent of God's salvation." Don't you hear Joseph announcing to his brothers that he is going to rule over them? How did those who heard Jesus respond to him? They wanted to know just who he thought he was. They hated him. They were jealous of him. They spoke against him at every opportunity. Eventually they killed him.

11. What are some ways you have seen this kind of hostility expressed for Christ and for Christians?

12. Have you ever experienced this kind of anger and hostility because you are a Christian?