

**SOVEREIGN GRACE OFTEN  
APPEARS VANQUISHED  
Genesis 17: 12-36**

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

## INTRODUCTION

Brainstorm a list of ways that the world does not appear to be under the control of an all-powerful, just and compassionate God. (Put yourself in the position of a person who has no knowledge of the Bible or of Jesus.)

Do the events, circumstances and relationships of your life appear to be ordered by an all-powerful, just and compassionate God? Why or why not?

The world seems a very chaotic and incoherent collection of events, materials and people. Granted, most people do not live as though the world is chaotic. We live as though our lives have purpose, as if the events in our lives make sense. Especially in the affluent west, where our money can insulate us from some of life's miseries, we act as though we are in control and life is working out to expected and chosen ends. But the fact is that we are truly in control of very few things in our lives individually and certainly we have no control over the physical world or the course of nations. Disease, accident and death strike randomly across all lines of societal differentiation. Human plans are interrupted by economic realities and fractured relationships. Tornadoes wipe out towns, floods eradicate entire communities, war decimates nations, snipers randomly kill, and accidents eliminate young men. When life is viewed from the horizontal perspective we must agree with the author of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

Genesis 37: 12-36 confronts us with a world that appears out of control. But we know, based upon the previous 36 chapters and upon 37:1-11

that these events are not random, but rather part of God's perfect plan. In this study we will examine some of the ways that God's sovereign grace appears to be vanquished.

## STUDY

**1.** Review the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants in Genesis 12:1-3, 26:2-5, 28:13-15 and God's promises to Joseph through his two dreams in 37: 1-11. Summarize what God has said is going to be the future of these people and particularly of Joseph.

*The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are going to be as numerous as the "dust of the earth". They will be a great nation. God will protect them. All the nations of the world will be blessed through them. They will possess the entire land of Canaan. Joseph is going to rule over his entire family. He will be the greatest of the 12 sons of Jacob.*

**2.** Jacob sends Joseph to look for his brothers who are shepherding their flocks in the region of Shechem. What happened the last time Jacob's family was at Shechem? (See chapter 34)

*Jacob and his family settled in the region of Shechem, even purchasing land there. However, his only daughter, Dinah, was raped and kidnapped by Shechem, the son of the king of Shechem, Hamor. He wanted to marry Dinah. Jacob's sons were furious with what was done to Dinah and hatched a plot to destroy the men of Shechem. They told Shechem he could marry their sister and that they would become as one people if all the men were circumcised. The men of the city agreed but while they were still in pain from the procedure that full brothers of Dinah, Simeon and Levi, murdered all the men of the city and then all the brothers plundered the city of Shechem. Jacob was furious with his bloodthirsty sons because he was sure that the surrounding Amorites, who were related to the people of Shechem would come and wipe them out. So the family fled from the vicinity of Shechem and eventually settled about 50 miles south at Hebron.*

**3.** What do we know about how the 10 brothers feel about Joseph from vv. 1-11?

*The ten brothers hate Joseph and are not able to even speak a polite word to him.*

**4.** In view of what we know about the brothers and about Shechem, how does Jacob's decision to send Joseph to check up on his brothers strike you?

*In the first eleven verses we were told three times his brothers hated Joseph. They were so jealous of his being given the rights of the firstborn son that they were not able to say anything polite or brotherly. They heaped abuse and scorn upon him at every chance they could get. Now Jacob sends Joseph 50 miles away from him to check up on these brothers who hate Joseph. Not only are we shocked by this profound ignorance of the brother's hatred but also we are shocked that Joseph is going to Shechem. I mean, shouldn't the memory of the violent hatred of these brothers at Shechem have prompted Jacob to exercise more caution? This is the height of foolish and ignorant behavior.*

**5.** Joseph discovers, when he arrives at Shechem that his brothers have moved the flocks another 12 miles north to the region of Dothan. What do you think, should he go to Dothan?

*Again, to go even further from his father to "check up on" his jealous, violent and hate filled brothers, seems very foolish and stupid. Don't you just want to yell at Joseph, "Don't go"?*

**6.** Describe a time that you have made a foolish decision that has brought harm to you and/or others.

**7.** Can foolish choices prevent God from working in your life? Can stupidity cut you off from God's sovereign grace?

**8.** How do the brothers respond when they spot Joseph coming towards them at Dothan?

*They immediately begin mocking him and plotting his murder. Their hatred and rage is given full vent as they plot how to assassinate him and cover up their crime. By talking with one another they stir up a "mob" mentality.*

**9.** The oldest brother, Reuben intervenes. What does he suggest they do instead of murder him outright? Why does he do so? (vv. 21-22)

*He suggests they throw him into a cistern and leave him there to die. That way they would not be guilty of shedding his blood with their own hands. We are told that he wants to rescue Joseph from their hands.*

**10.** What was the last time we were told anything about Reuben (35:19-22)? Whose son is Reuben? What possible reasons could Reuben have for wanting to rescue Joseph?

*Reuben raped one of his father's wives. Actually, she was the maidservant of Rachael, Jacob's favorite wife. Reuben was trying to prevent Bilhah from becoming the favorite wife by defiling her through rape. He was seeking to defend his mother, Leah, whom Jacob did not love. There are two possible motives for Reuben's behavior. Perhaps having Joseph take his place as the firstborn son has broken him and he has repented of his sin and is seeking to do the right thing because he is living by faith now. Or perhaps he sees an opportunity to get back into the good graces of his father and regain at least some of the power and wealth that he lost by his rape. We are not told why he is doing this.*

**11.** What do the brothers do to Joseph when he finally arrives? (Use your imagination and describe what might have been said and done.)

*As he came into the midst of his brothers, they jumped upon him as one man and began to punch him and kick him. Reuben began to wildly call out, "Let's get that pretty robe off from him and throw him in the cistern." He grabbed hold of Joseph and dragged him to his feet and the other brothers gleefully pulled off the robe that marked Joseph's status in the family as the rightful and chosen ruler of the brothers. Reuben trussed him like a sheep to be slaughtered and threw him over his shoulders, carrying him to the cistern that was over the ridge about a half-mile away. The other brothers followed behind, dancing and mocking him as Reuben carried him to his fate. They would fall to their knees and cry out, "O Master, please don't hurt me. O great ruler, you're so strong and brave, what can I do to serve you?" When they arrived at the cistern, Reuben cut the cords and roughly threw him into the deep, but dry cistern. Joseph lay in a crumpled ball, crying as his brothers kicked dirt down upon him, spit, and mocked, saying, "Let's see what comes of your dreams now!" Then they left him and went back to camp.*

**12.** Have you ever felt like doing this to a sibling, parent or child?

**13.** While they are eating they see a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants. What does Judah, the fourth born son of Leah and Jacob, suggest they do? Why does he make this suggestion?

*He suggests that they sell Joseph to the merchants and thus into a life of slavery. He suggests this because he is greedy. He wants to make a profit off from Joseph. He also sees this as a way to keep them from incurring the guilt of murdering their own flesh and blood. I think there is strong likelihood that the last half of v. 27 is a cynical and sarcastic comment.*

**14.** What do the brothers do?

*They sell their brother to the merchants for 20 pieces of silver and they take him to Egypt.*

**15.** Apparently, Reuben did not join them for lunch. He must have excused himself under some pretense in order to return to the cistern to rescue Joseph and head back to Hebron. How did Reuben respond when he found that Joseph was gone?

*He panics and tears his clothes. He returns to his brothers and exclaims that Joseph is not in the cistern. He then says, literally, "Now I, where can I go?"*

**16.** In light of what Reuben says and in light of what happens next (vv. 31-32) what can we conclude about Reuben's motives in wanting to "rescue" Joseph?

*Reuben was looking out for number one, himself. The repetition of the "I" in his statement gives away his true motive. In addition, if he was so keen on rescuing his brother, why did he not go after the merchants and buy him back? Why did he consent to go along with the cover-up? He was not concerned with Joseph but with using Joseph to get back into his brother's good graces. NOTE: the text, as is usually the case in Genesis, does not really tell us what motivated Reuben. It is possible that he had good motives and that in the face of his brother's hatred and violence he could not do anything for Joseph. You do not need to insist on this interpretation, but it seems the most reasonable to me.*

**17.** In Luke 18: 31 Jesus says to his disciples, "Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled." Make a list of all the ways this story about Joseph points to the Jesus.

- *Like Jesus, Joseph is the beloved son sent by the father, from the father's side, to seek the peace (literal translation of v. 14) of the Jewish nation (the descendants of these brothers)*
- *Like Jesus, Joseph is hated by those to whom he is sent.*
- *Like Jesus, those who hate him plot to kill him*
- *Like Jesus, those who hate him, mock him*
- *Like Jesus, he is betrayed by those who ought to love him and protect him*
- *Like Jesus, he is sold for pieces of silver*
- *Like Jesus, there are those who seek to "rescue" him from execution but for unclear motives (i.e. Pilate).*

**18.** In the case of Jesus, did the evil done to him interfere with God's plan for him? (See Acts 4:27-28) How about Joseph?

*In the case of Jesus all the evil done to him accomplished God's purposes. As we will see, the same is true for Joseph.*

**19.** Have you ever been harmed by the evil that others have intentionally done to you?

**20.** Can evil done to you keep God's good purposes from being fulfilled in your life? Why or why not?

*Human evil never vanquishes God's good work to save his people and restore the universe. Whether it is the evil that you do or the evil that is done against you, God's grace is greater and more powerful. God works in and through all the evil that men do to save all those who trust in Christ and to bring the world to the end that he has planned. No one and nothing can resist his will. Now the amazing thing is that he does this through human choice. Joseph's brother's and Jesus' executioners are guilty of great evil and will be held accountable by God. However, God is so great and so gracious that he is able to rule over human freedom in such a way that our free and evil choices serve his good purposes. Therefore, we do not need to fear when terrorists fly planes into office buildings or when snipers randomly kill or when your spouse divorces you or when your child gets caught doing drugs. I'm not saying evil doesn't matter. What I am saying is that even human evil cannot impede God's unmerited, saving work from moving ahead, on his timetable. When you do evil you need to know that God is able and*

*willing to rescue you. Your evil cannot separate you from the love of God, so do not despair when you do wrong but flee to Christ in repentance and faith. When evil is done to you, do not despair, flee to Christ and rejoice in his promises to save all those who trust in him and to punish all those who do evil.*

**21.** What do the brothers do in order to cover up their crime?

*They kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on Josephs' coat, that his father made for him. The coat that is the symbol of his father's love and of Joseph's rightful place as the head of his brothers is ripped and bloodied and then presented to Jacob. The brothers say they found the coat in the wilderness and ask Jacob to see if it is "his son's" (not "our brother's") coat.*

**22.** What did Jacob and his mother use to deceive his father, Isaac (chapter 27:9 & 15)? Why is there this similarity?

*Jacob and his mother used a lamb and his brother's clothes to deceive Isaac in the same way these brothers use a lamb and their brother's clothing to deceive Jacob. We are to see both God's providential punishment upon Jacob and the fact that he is working in the midst of these circumstances. Just as it was God's will for Jacob to be blessed by Isaac, rather than Esau and so God used the evil of Rebekah and Jacob to accomplish his good purpose, so we are to see in this deception that God is at work to fulfill his purposes for Joseph and all his chosen people.*

**23.** How does Jacob respond to the bloodied and torn robe?

*He acknowledges that it is his son's coat and then he draws the conclusion that Joseph has been killed and torn apart by some ferocious beast. He then proceeds to mourn over his lost son. He cannot be consoled and is determined to live out his days in sorrow. He is sure his son is dead and the presence of 11 living sons and dozens of grandchildren cannot console him.*

**24.** How does Jacob's response to the "death" of Joseph compare with Abraham's response to the "death" of Isaac (chapter 22, Heb. 11:17-19)?

*Jacob, for whatever reason, is not able to do what Abraham did, when God told him to offer his son as a sacrifice. Abraham was able to offer his son, who God had said was the key player in his plan of salvation, because he believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead. Abraham lost Isaac and did not despair because he knew that even death could not end God's promises. But Jacob refused to believe the promises and so he despaired.*

**25.** What is the point of the contrast between Jacob's despair in v. 35 and Joseph's being sold as a slave, alive, in v. 36? Compare and contrast this with the despair of the disciples after Jesus was killed.

*In many ways Jacob is just like the disciples following the death of Jesus. They too despair when their Lord is killed. Do you remember what the angels said when the women came to the empty tomb and were shocked that it was empty? They were wondering where the officials had taken his body and the angel shows up and rebukes them, saying, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"* When God has made promises, not even death can stop those promises from being fulfilled. Jacob should have known this and believed the promise. However, he did not believe and so was overcome with despair. Jacob despairs because he thinks Joseph is dead, but he's not dead. He's alive. Not even death can overcome God's sovereign grace. Not even Jacob's unbelieving despair can stop God's gracious, saving work from going forward. Jacob is going to live in 20 years of despair, but in the end he will see his son alive.

**26.** Can death and despair over death halt God's good purposes in the lives of his people?