

STUDY GUIDE 1

Genesis 1

HE MADE OUR WORLD TO BE LIVED IN

Overview

Genesis 1-11 affirms that you and I live in a *personal universe*. The material and moral world were designed by a Person, who made mankind distinct from the rest of Creation. There is no hint here of the pagan notion that objects (like the sun or moon) are "gods." There is no hint of the modern fiction that life was generated spontaneously from nonliving matter, to gradually evolve from single cells into the complex forms we know today. Genesis sets forth a personal God as the ultimate reality. He is the root and source of all that exists.

Genesis 12-50 emphasizes another message. We live in a *purposive universe*. These chapters tell the story of God's call of Abraham, and God's unveiling in the Abrahamic Covenant of a divine plan and purpose to history. We can outline Genesis by these two themes:

- I. A Personal Universe (Gen. 1-11)
- II. A Purposive Universe (Gen. 12-50)

► *Create*. The Hebrew word *bara'* is used only of God's activity in initiating a thing or project. The Bible teaches that God initiated (created) the universe, humanity, forgiveness, and new life for sinners.

■ See the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Victor) pages 15-26 for a thorough discussion of the date, authorship, and non-mythical nature of Genesis.

Commentary

Genesis 1 isn't the only source of our conviction that God is Creator. Both Old and New Testaments teach the essential integrity of all we read in Genesis. Both help us explore the meaning of Genesis' towering affirmations about God and the world which we meet first in this initial chapter of our Bible.

One of the most striking additions is in

Isaiah: "For Jehovah created the heavens and earth and put everything in place, and He made the world to be lived in, not to be an empty chaos" (Isa. 45:18, TLB). The universe was shaped for a purpose: to be the home of humankind. However vast our expanding universe may be, God cares most about living beings, not inanimate matter. Psalm 104 reviews God's creative act and praises Him for forming our world as a habitation for "living things both great and small." The psalmist's heart fills with wonder as he realizes:

These all look to You to give them their food at the proper time. When You give it to them, they gather it up; when You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When You hide Your face, they are terrified; when You take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When You send Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth.

Psalm 104:27-30

The psalmist concludes, "Praise God forever! How He must rejoice in all His works!" (v. 31, TLB)

V *Link to Life: Youth 1 Adult*

God's people have been captivated from earliest times by the witness of the universe to our Lord. How have they responded? Look in Job 38; Psalms 104; 148; and Isaiah 40. Meditate on God as Creator, then express your own heart response to Him as did these authors of Scripture.

The Personal Touch

When we teach the familiar Creation story, it's important for us to adopt the attitude of the psalmist. The psalmist acknowledges God as Creator. He knows the story of the seven days. But as the psalmist meditates,

his thoughts are not drawn off to speculations about, "How?" Instead, the psalmist moves quickly beyond the "scientific" questions that so attract us to focus on the central message: All that exists is the work of a Person. Everything around us has been carefully and thoughtfully designed. Creation is a mirror, placed to reflect our thoughts and our worship back to the Person whose image Creation enables us to see.

This is the central message of Genesis 1. Our attention is directed not to the world, but to its Maker. The psalmist, recognizing this, exults, "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live. I will praise God to my last breath! May He be pleased by all these thoughts about Him, for He is the source of all my joy" (Ps. 104:33-34, TLB).

♥ *Link to Life: Children*

You can help children respond to God with praise for His creation. Begin with a nature walk, asking the boys and girls to look for things that are beautiful, and things they especially like. On return teach them the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth" (in most church hymnals). After learning the first two verses, work as a class to construct a third verse, featuring the things your children liked and thought of as beautiful.

Old and New Testaments agree that Creation gives a compelling witness to God. Psalm 19 points out that the universe itself is a wordless message about God which anyone, whatever his language, can hear.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

Psalm 19:1-4

Paul made this same point in Romans 1. But there Paul saw Creation as evidence to be used against those who do not believe. Paul argued that man's wickedness is revealed in the human struggle to suppress the knowledge of God available to all in creation. "What may be known about God is

plain to them," the New Testament affirms, "because God has made it plain to them. For since the Creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (vv. 19-20). Creation is such compelling proof of God's existence, and such a clear reflection of His character, that any explanation of beginnings which rules God out serves only to underline human perversity.

It is striking to trace attempts to explain the material universe apart from God. In the culture from which Abraham sprang, the ancients imagined that the material universe was rooted in a great waste of waters, sweet water and salt water, personified in myth as two gods, male and female. Creation began as intercourse between this pair. Then war arose between the parents and their children, viewed as secondary gods. One of these lesser gods killed the original father, but the original female was a much greater threat. However, the hero god, Marduk, was elected leader and overthrew her, ultimately shaping earth and sky from her dead body. The epic poem, "Enuma Elish," telling this story reports:

Then the lord paused to view her dead body.

That he might divide the monster and do artful works

He split her like a shellfish into two parts;

Half of her he set up and called it sky.

For decades liberal scholars have noted slight similarities between this Babylonian myth and the Genesis Creation story. They suggested that the stories sprang from a common origin and share a common character. Yet Henry Frankfort, in *Before Philosophy* (Penguin Books), observed that fundamental pagan assumptions about the world were "in fact universally accepted by the peoples of the ancient world with the single exception of the Hebrews."

In reality there are so many fundamental differences between ancient concepts of Creation and the Scripture, which insists that God be understood as the One who made the material universe from nothing and who remains distinct from it, that Genesis can hardly be explained by appeal to

some supposed common cultural heritage! The Bible's teaching about God and Creation is explained only by the fact that, in His Word, God speaks. God has cut through the distorted notions of fallen humanity about this world and about Him, to show us a totally different vision of reality.

Even today, men continue their attempts to explain God away and to find a different face in the mirror of Creation. These attempts are a striking reversal of the Babylonian myths. While the ancients saw the material universe as the remains of once-living gods, moderns suggest that life sprang from dead and inert matter!

How could it have happened? Somehow in the great shallow seas life, it is said, was spawned. Over the eons, life forms grew more complex. The single cell multiplied, differentiating into eye and lung and brain and blood and bone. Never mind the fact that biologists "know of no other way than random mutation by which new hereditary variation comes into being" (C.H. Waddington, *The Nature of Life*, Athenium). Ignore the fact that "there is a delicate balance between an organism and its environment which a mutation can easily upset" so that "one could as well expect that altering the position of the brake or gas pedal at random would improve the operation of an automobile" (Frederick S. Hulse, *The Human Species*, Random House). Today, as in the ancient world, the urge persists to find some explanation for man and the universe, but an explanation which leaves out God.

Yet reason and revelation both bear witness. You and I live in *God's* universe. As we teach this wonderful passage we do so with the attitude of the psalmist, who acknowledged God, and who worshiped and praised the Lord for His wonderful creative works.

♥ *Link to Life: Youth I Adult*

What difference does it really make if the universe has its origin in God, or if lifeless matter is the source of our existence? Jot down the following two lists of words: (1) cold, dead, lifeless, uncaring, and (2) warm, vital, loving, alive. Suppose that you

scribed by the first set of words. How will you feel about yourselves, about others, about your future, about what has value? Then suppose you exist in a universe characterized by the second set of words.

Now how will you feel about yourself, others, about your future, about what has value? Compare conclusions. How wonderful that God has revealed to us the true nature of His universe, that we might have comfort and hope.

God of the Universe

Even the first few words of Genesis 1 convey concepts that are vast in their sweep and power.

"*In the beginning.*" The Greeks had a cosmology of endless cycle. They thought that the universe was born in fire, cooled to shape the world they knew, but was destined to soon flare up again and then repeat the same cycle endlessly every 10,000 years. The life they knew was just another rerun of what had always been, and what would be again.

But God affirms a beginning. Genesis teaches a point in time at which an irreversible process began. We must go back to this origin if we are ever to grasp the nature of the world we live in, and the meaning of our individual lives.

"*In the beginning God.*" This too is a powerful concept. Unlike men who struggle to find the meaning of life within the limits of the physical universe, we seek meaning by looking beyond material things to the Person of the Creator.

Others can attempt to explain themselves as the result of random surgings in a lifeless sea billions of years ago. But those who do so surrender the possibility of purpose and meaning for themselves as individuals. What meaning can be found in chance happenings in an impersonal universe? What meaning, when not only our individual lives flicker out after sparking briefly in the endless dark, but when mankind itself must look back to a mindless past and ahead to the certain dimming of our sun and the settling mantle of an eternal chill?

But Genesis 1 affirms *God*. God, a Person with mind and emotion and the power of choice, existed before the beginning. With the discovery of God the very character of the universe shifts and changes before our eyes. The ultimate reality is not random motion in dead, impersonal matter. The ultimate reality is a living, vital, personal Being. Life, not death, is the eternal ground of all that is.

You and I can find no meaning in a life

which has roots in the chance interplay of mindless atoms. But we can find meaning when we realize that our lives were given us by another living personality. If God exists, and God is the cause of the material world, then we can look for meaning in His purposes in creating.

"In the beginning God created," Here we find a special sense of comfort and joy. God did act, freely and from His own choice, to create. There is meaning to the universe, and a purpose to human life.

This is a particularly important thought. The Deists of eighteenth-century England, like the Aucas of modern South American jungles, had the notion of a "watchmaker God." They saw God as someone who wound up the universe like a clock, and then left it ticking, to run down, as he wandered off on other business, unconcerned about the toy he'd formed. But the Genesis portrait of Creation implies something far different. The complexity of what is made, the care God takes in shaping it, the purpose and design revealed, all show that God acted with a sense of purpose, making our world more meaningful than an abandoned toy.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God stands behind it all. The God of Genesis is no platonic demiurge who, like a potter, merely shaped an already existing clay. The living God does not share His eternity with rock, or even with the billion stars that span our sky. The Source of all, the only and the ultimate reality, is God.

♥ *Link to Life: Children*
Have your boys and girls make reminders of the love of God that shines through His creation. Let them make multiple pin-pricks in black construction paper. This can

child's room. With the light on, dots of "starlight" will shine through the dark paper. With this project teach Psalm 148:1-6:

Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise Him in the heights above. Praise Him, all His angels, praise Him, all His heavenly hosts. Praise Him, sun and moon, praise Him, all you shining stars. Praise Him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for He commanded and

they were created. He set them in place forever and ever; He gave a decree that will never pass away.

I've shared these few thoughts, not because I intend to comment on each verse and phrase in Genesis 1, but to show how important it is not to pass on too quickly. We've read or heard these words a hundred times. Our very familiarity with them may blind us to the fact that this chapter, from its first words, expresses truths as powerful as any we might imagine.

We're not dealing here with "primitive myth." We're listening to the thoughts, the revelations, of God. We are invited into His heart and mind to find a clear expression of the deepest issues with which men can be concerned. And so we need to read and to listen—and to teach—well.

I suggested earlier that we might view the biblical story of Creation as a mirror; a mirror that reflects the person of God. How true this is of the first verses of this powerful Genesis chapter. In just a few short words God wiped away the mists that cloud the mirror and commands us to look at *Him*. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

What will you see as you read through this chapter, looking closely into the mirror to glimpse our God's features? You'll see many things that reveal what God is like.

You'll see, for instance, that God is a God of *order*. Isaiah said, "He made the world to be lived in, not to be an empty chaos" (Isa. 45:18, TLB).

Many have noted patterns within the days of Creation. Joseph Free (*Archeology and Bible History*, Scripture Press) notes the orderly progression of the process through each day:

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1st, light | 4th, light-bearers |
| 2nd, firmament | 5th, marine and aerial life |
| 3rd, dry land | 6th, land animals and man |

Charles Pfeiffer (*The Biblical World*, Baker) suggests this pattern:

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Work of Division | Works of Adorning |
| 1st: light | 4th: sun, moon, stars |
| 2nd: air and sea | 5th: birds, fish |
| 3rd: land, plants | 6th: animals and man |

However we wish to express it, it's clear that in the Creation account there are distinct sequences and order. Chaos and randomness are rejected.

Several patterns you will find in Genesis 1 are tremendously revealing of who God is and what He is like.

Differentiation. Often our text says, "And God separated," as in, "He separated the light from the darkness" (v. 4). The Hebrew word here means "to make a distinction between." Light is distinguished from dark, earth from sea, day from night—as God sets up a stable pattern for His universe.

Dominion. Priority is also found in Creation. Genesis 1 speaks of rule and dominion. There is a difference in function, and some functions have a higher value or priority.

Diversity. The vast complexity and multiple forms of inanimate matter and of life are also revealing. From the uniqueness of each snowflake to the individuality shown in the animal world, God's delight in creative expression and His concern for individuals are shown.

Dependability. Through it all, in the alternation and pulse between night and day, season and season, God's consistency is clearly revealed.

Delight. And then we hear God's judgment: "It was good." In the pattern of the universe which God created we discover a God who we can trust because He clearly *cares*. He is not changeable or capricious, for He designed the world to be stable and orderly. We discover a God who values and, in valuing, chooses always to do that which is, in every way, good.

▼ *Link to Life: Youth 1 Adult*

Explore Genesis 1 to discover these and other traits of God. Make a list of all you believe you can learn about Him from the actions reported here. Then see how many "because . . ." statements you can generate. For instance, "Because God is a Person who chooses to do what is good, I can trust myself and my life to Him." Or, "Because God is a Person who values individuals, I can be assured that I am special to Him."

Finally, Genesis 1 has a climax. Creation has a purpose beyond the pleasure express-

ing His character might give to the Lord. Creation is also an expression of love, for God designed the world as a gift to be given to the highest of His creations: humankind. And so the text tells us that God created man in His own image (a teaching we'll look at in the next study guide). And God determined to give man dominion over all He had made.

Thus the words repeated to Adam, "I give you . . ." stand as a benediction to the wonders revealed in Genesis 1. "I give you" is a benediction which marks God as One who cares for others; a benediction which is the Bible's first indication that the God of Creation is a God of love.

But, God

I suppose that it isn't strange, but when we read the first chapter of Genesis we sometimes find it hard to recapture the mood of the psalmist. We see the problems, the questions we want answered. We ignore God's great affirmation about Himself and our universe to pose the query, "But God, what about those 24-hour days? And, when did Creation really take place?"

The days. There have been many speculations offered which try to relate Genesis 1 to what we think we know about the origins of the universe. Suggestions about how to understand the "days" include:

1. The gap theory. This supposes an original Creation of order and beauty, ruined by Satan's fall. Genesis 1 describes a reconstruction. The name comes from the proposal of an ages-long gap between Genesis 1:1 (God created) and verse 2 (the earth was in chaos).

2. The indefinite age theory. This supposes that the term "day" is figurative; that, in fact, the creative activity of each day covers geologic eras. The "day" in which man appeared has not yet ended.

3. The Creation *in situ* theory. This suggests a Creation in 24-hour days, a short few thousand years ago. Coal, petroleum, and fossils were all created in place. The history in the fossil record is only "apparent."

4. The revelatory day theory. This supposes that God revealed His work to Moses in seven literal days. The evenings and the mornings mentioned in Genesis 1 were days in Moses' life, not actual days of Creation.

5. The literary device theory. This sug-

gests that the human author simply used "days" to organize his material. The facts are true, but not the framework.

6. The myth theory. This, the first theory not advanced by orthodox believers, suggests that the passage is not historical in any sense, but is symbolic. It contains only "theological" truths, not history.

There are many books and articles that argue for one or another of these theories. But the fact is, the text of Genesis and the doctrine of revelation do not seem to demand that we reject any of them except the last. Which is right? Our curiosity is not satisfied. God seems to care only that we look beyond the "how" to Him.

Dating. Dating the Creation has also generated endless speculation. Some 300 years ago an Irish bishop, Ussher, computed the date of Creation by studying the genealogies of Genesis. His conclusion? Creation took place in 4004 B.C. But by 1738 there had been over 200 known attempts to compute the date, with proposed times ranging from 3483 B.C. to 6984 B.C.

These attempts at dating assumed that the genealogies of the Bible were complete, and overlooked the Hebrew way of compressing genealogical records. For instance, compare Exodus 6:16-20 where there are only 4 links between Levi and Moses mentioned with 1 Chronicles 7:20-27 where 17 links are

listed between a nephew of Levi (Ephraim) and Joshua. Clearly, the terms "son of and "beget" are used in Hebrew literature in the sense of "descendant" and "progenitor" rather than of "child" and "parent."

Modern approaches to dating also fall short. For instance, we can accept Carbon-14 dating for antiquities of 7,000 to 10,000 B.C. in the Middle East. But this tells us nothing about the cosmic time scale, nor does it suggest when Creation might have taken place.

Somehow, Genesis does not seem concerned with the kind of questions we like to raise. It is enough for the writer of Genesis to affirm God. It is enough for the writer to show us that we human beings live today in a universe that can only be understood when we too affirm God.

Perhaps that should be enough for you and me too. Perhaps we should adopt the focus of Genesis 1, and the attitude of the psalmist. We are to look not to our instruments but to the clear witness of God which is provided by the vast and orderly universe in which we live.

We are to study and teach not to satisfy curiosity, but to enrich our own and others' wonder at and love for the God who gives us such a bright vision of Himself in this beautiful chapter of His trustworthy Word.

TEACHING GUIDE

Prepare

Prepare for study of Genesis 1 by reading Psalm 104:1-5, 33-34. Read these verses aloud; then silently as a prayer.

Explore

1. The study guide suggests that indications of what God is like are found in the Genesis report of Creation (such indications as evidence of His dependability, of His valuing, etc.). Locate these and as many other indications of God's character as you can find in the Old Testament text. The key to this inductive study activity is to look at the verbs which describe God's acts, and then reason back to what His actions suggest about the Lord.

2. Christian bookstores and church libraries often carry books that compare the biblical

and modern "scientific" views of origins. When we study the evidence, we discover that Scripture's account better explains that evidence than does the secular, evolutionary view. If this is a concern of yours, or of group members, check out such books to read or to make available to your group.

Expand

1. The New Testament teaches that Jesus was the active Agent in Creation (cf. John 1:1-5; Col. 1:15-20). Read Genesis 1, substituting Jesus' name for "God." Does this help you sense Creation as a personal and loving act?

2. Make the two lists suggested in the "link-to-life" feature on page 21. Compare the lists, to sense how wonderful and how important God's revelation of Himself as Cre-

ator is to you and me today.

3. Write down as many "Because God is" statements as you can to express the difference that living in God's personal universe makes to human beings. See the "link-to-life" feature on page 23.

Apply

How we respond to God's revelation of Himself as Creator is an issue emphasized throughout the Bible. The unbeliever tries

to suppress the evidence of God found in Creation, refusing to glorify God or give thanks to Him (cf. Rom. 1:21). We who believe joyfully acknowledge Him, glorifying Him with our praise and thanksgiving.

You can respond in these ways: in prayer, in music, by writing your own psalm, or by combining verses from Genesis 1 with psalms to build a worship liturgy to share in your church or group.