

Study Guide for Genesis 1-11

The first chapters of Genesis are some of the most widely discussed chapters of the whole Bible. Not only is it rich in theological meaning, it is also addresses issues which are of universal curiosity. Everyone wants to know where we came from. Needless to say, this chapter has also sparked much controversy as it has come into apparent conflict with the theories of modern science.

The goal of this study guide is to provide some brief explanations of the text under the heading “Interpretive Helps” and then to provide questions for group discussion. These questions may touch on controversial issues in the debate between science and scripture, but the main intent is to focus on the theological meaning of the text. I hope your discussions are lively and thought provoking. I am sure they will stretch your understanding and deepen your appreciation for this wonderful book.

The intent has not been to provide you with the answers, but to challenge you to think through the text. There is a leader’s guide available for group leaders

In writing this guide I have mainly refereed to commentaries on Genesis by Bruce Waltke and Gordon Wenham

In Christ

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Study 1: The Days of Creation Genesis 1:1-25

Interpretive Helps.

The heavens and the earth: This is a phrase which means the entire universe.

Formless and empty (tohu wabohu): Notice that the earth is already created before the six days of creation. This description shows the earth as disorganized and inhospitable to life.

Relation between first 2 verses and the rest of the chapter: The traditional interpretation is that the first verse speaks of the first act of creation which preceded the 6 days. The 6 days are clearly marked off with the first “And God said..” in verse 3. This first verse would then refer to God’s creation of the universe out of nothing, with the 6 days referring to the forming of the earth into a place hospitable for life.

Creation by Word: Notice that each day of creation begins with the phrase “And God said, “Let ...” God creates through the power of his word. This leads other Biblical authors to describe Jesus as the word, through whom all things are made. (see John 1:1-3)

Progress of Creation: The account is divided into two corresponding sets of three days which corresponds to the resolution of the earth being formless and empty.

Forming the Formless

Filling the Emptiness

Day 1: Light (1:3-5)

Day 4: Sun Moon and Stars (1:14-19)

Day 2: Seas and Sky (1:6-8)

Day 5: Fish and Birds (1:20-23)

Day 3: Land and Plants (1:9-13)

Day 6: Land animals and humans (1:24-31)

Day (yom): Textually the word means nothing more than a 24 hour day as supported by the evening and morning repetition. The text does not seem to allow for the days to refer to longer epochs. The difficulty has been that science has difficulty with the 6 days. A third interpretation, consistent with the theological and not scientific approach of Genesis is that while day means day, is that the days are meant more as a literary structure to illustrate the orderly nature of God, than a specific historical or scientific chronology.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement. “Genesis 1 is a piece of literature that was intended to teach us about God and should not be understood as a scientific or historical description of the origin of the universe.” (Supply evidence from the text to support your position.)

2. What does this chapter tell us about the character of God and the way he works?
3. What hints can you see in this chapter of the Trinitarian understanding of God?
4. Why is it important to recognize that there is a creator?
5. Scientists claim to have evidence that the planet and universe is older than 6000 years. Does this call into question the integrity of Genesis 1?
6. Some people suggest that God could have used evolution in his creation process. Can such a belief be consistent with this text?
7. Should scientific discoveries be used to guide our understanding of a Biblical text?
8. How important is it to take this chapter as literally as possible?

Study 2: Creation of Humanity & Sabbath Genesis 1:26 to 2:3

Interpretive Helps:

“Let us make...”: Many see this as a hint of plurality in God as per the Trinity. This does explain the shifts in the text from plural to singular. This however is not a definite proof of the Trinity. The reference could also be interpreted as God speaking to the angels in his heavenly court. (See also Gen 3:22, Gen 11:7 and Isa 6:8) Some have suggested that the plural intensifies majesty, but this is not generally done with pronouns.

Cultural Mandate: God’s calling humanity to fill the earth and rule over it is sometimes called the cultural mandate.

Discussion Questions:

1. In comparing the creation of other things with the creation of humanity, what evidence can you find in the text that the creation of humanity is more personal and special?
2. In what ways do humans display the image of God?
3. What does this passage teach us about God’s purpose in creating humanity?
4. Does the cultural mandate gives us the right to rule over creation in any way we see fit?
5. Do animal rights people have some valid points? How would this passage help guide us in the way we treat animals?
6. In what ways does the description of the seventh day differ from the previous six.
7. Keeping in mind that Sabbath keeping in the New Testament is no longer required (Colossians 2:16 and Rom 14:5-23), what spiritual benefits might we receive by keeping the Sabbath?
8. Are there any things that you do or do not do as an intentional act of worship on a Sabbath (or seventh) day?

Study 3: Adam and Eve in the Garden Genesis 2:4-25

Interpretive Helps

This is the account of: (2:4) This phrase is used at the beginning of each of the major divisions within the overall book of Genesis. A more literal translation would be the KJV “these are the generations of” It speaks about what the heaven and earth has generated not the generation of the heaven and earth. (See also divisions at 5:1, 6:9, 10:1)

Adam: This is not only the name for the first man, it is also the Hebrew word that means “man”. It also sounds like the Hebrew word for ground (adamah) from which the man was made (2:7)

Knowledge of Good and Evil: This tree represents moral knowledge that is only appropriate for God. This fruit is forbidden because God has designed us to be dependent on him for such knowledge.

Suitable Helper: (2:18, 20) This is a phrase used of Eve, but it is not a negative thing. In fact, in the Bible, this word (helper) is most frequently used to refer to God. Being described as helper does not therefore imply any inadequacy or inferiority. The term signifies essential contribution.

Surely die: (2:17) Although this may refer to physical death, it is primarily focused on spiritual death which is defined by the destruction of relationship with God.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does this passage teach about the character of God and the type of relationship he desires with us?
2. What key elements define this as an ideal existence? How will it be similar to heaven? How is it different?
3. Why do you think that God placed the forbidden fruit in the garden in the first place?
4. What does this passage teach about marriage and the roles of men and women within a marriage?
5. Can you make a case from this passage and the previous chapter for the equality of the sexes?
6. What does this passage teach about work?

Study 4: The Fall Genesis 3:1-24

Interpretive Helps:

Serpent: Why is the snake chosen as tempter? The text never explicitly says so, but it is obvious that this is not an ordinary snake, but a manifestation of Satan. The snake is an unclean animal and a good symbol for anti-god.

Nakedness / Covering: The realization of nakedness after disobedience show forth shame and the loss of innocence. It is interesting that God provided clothing from animal skin. Some see here an example of sacrifice. The animal was killed to cover their shame.

Where are you, Who told you?: These questions should not imply ignorance on God's behalf, but are for the benefit of the drama.

Desire for husband: (3:16) It is unclear if the word means desire for husband or desire to rule over or be independent of husband.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did the serpent twist God's words? What can this teach us about how Satan may tempt us?
2. What is the sin that they committed and how is this typical of all sin?
3. What does this passage teach us about the consequences of sin?
4. At what points do you see hope and future salvation in this passage?
5. How does this passage set the stage for the rest of the Bible?
6. In God's words to the woman (3:16), what does this say about the way that husbands and wives ought to interact with each other. How does this passage relate to Ephesians 5:21-33.
7. How is death both a curse and a blessing?

Study 5: The Heritage of Sin Genesis 4:1-26

Interpretive Helps:

Did not look with favor: Why was Cain's offering rejected? We have to assume that Cain and Abel had some instruction from the Lord, since God tells Cain that he should have done what is right (4:7). Although it may have been that Cain's was not a blood sacrifice, not all offerings require blood. Looking to the text we see that while Abel brought the choice portions from his flock there is no indication that Cain brought the best. He was likely holding back and making token offerings.

Cain's Wife: It has often been asked where Cain gets his wife. We have to assume that he married a sister. This may seem distasteful to us, but at the time there was no law against this and it is likely that there was as yet no problems genetically.

Whoever finds me... It is unclear who Cain is afraid of. Most likely he fears future descendants of Adam seeking revenge.

Genealogies: One major theme of Genesis is the tracing of the righteous line versus the unrighteous. In chapter four we see the sinful line traced through Cain and in Chapter 5 we see the "righteous" line traced through Seth. This does not mean that all the people in one line are evil and all in the other are good. These genealogies in some ways represent the outflow of Genesis 3:15 which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ who is a descendent of Seth.

Discussion Questions:

1. What can we learn from the rejection of Cain's offering? How can Heb 11:4 help us in this?
2. Looking to verse 4:7, what can we learn about sin and temptation?
3. How is Cain's response inappropriate when being confronted with sin? Why is David forgiven, when his sin is comparable? (2 Samuel 12:13, Psalm 51)
4. Why do you think that the boastful poem of Lamech is included in Genesis (4:23-24)?
5. Compare Enoch (5:21-24) and Lamech (4:19-24). Each are the seventh from Adam. What can we learn from this comparison?
6. Reflect on 1 John 3:11-15 and discuss how the story of Cain and Abel can be instructive for our lives today.
7. What is the overall message of this chapter?

Study 6: Noah and the Flood Genesis 6:1 – 8:19

Interpretive Helps:

Sons of God: (6:2) This is one of the most curious passages in the Bible. A variety of interpretations have been put forward

1. They were angelic beings. This is the oldest interpretation and is consistent with Job 1:6 where sons of God refers to angels. It is puzzling however that angels would marry humans and have children
2. It refers to the Godly line of Seth intermarrying with women from the line of Cain. This seems a strange way of saying this however.
3. It refers to kingly men who took women at will.
4. Or perhaps demonically possessed men.

As strange as it may be, the angel interpretation is probably best.

Nephilim: (Translated Giants in the KJV) It is difficult to tell if they were the product of this union between the sons of God and daughters of men or were merely contemporaries. They are heroic mighty men probably of large size. Interestingly the Israelites encounter Nephilim when spying on Canaan. (Num 13:33) Along with the phrase in 6:4 that says “they were on the earth in those days and also afterward”, it is curious how they survived the flood. The term, however probably refers to a type of people and not a direct lineage.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Genesis 6:1-8 and indeed the whole flood story contribute to the theme of the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent from Genesis 3:15
2. What does the flood story tell us about God and what he values?
3. What does the flood story tell us about salvation? What parallels can you see between the flood story and future judgment and salvation?
4. What does the role and description of Noah teach us about the way we are to interact with God.?
5. Do you find it difficult to believe in the flood story? Why or why not?
6. Some people argue that the flood was localized to Mesopotamia or the world populated by men. Is there anything in the text to support or contradict such a belief? Does the message of the story require a global flood?
7. Given the theme of the story, how is it that Noah’s ark has become a popular children’s story and decorating theme? What does this say about our attitude towards this story?

Study 7: After the Flood Genesis 8:20 – 10:32

Interpretive Helps

Covenant: First mentioned in 6:18 God's covenant with Noah and all living things is established in chapter 9. Covenant is the major theme in the Bible. A covenant is a solemn relationship that is unusually accompanied by vows, signs and obligations. The Bible teaches us how God in his grace enters into covenant with people. At this point God vows to never cut off life by flood waters.

Sin of Ham: Although people have looked for sexual connotations, the sin of Ham is one of disrespect for his Father in both looking at his nakedness, doing nothing about it and then gossiping about it to others. We must remember that this is a culture where high respect is due to one's parents.

Curse of Canaan: It is baffling as to why Canaan is cursed and not Ham. There is no easy answer here except that descendants follow the pattern of their ancestors. Given that Genesis was written at a time when the Israelites were displacing the descendants of Canaan, perhaps this curse is remembered as an explanation as to why the Canaanites must be removed.

Genealogies: Remember that one major theme of Genesis is the tracing of the righteous line versus the unrighteous. In chapter ten we see the sinful line traced through Ham and we see the "righteous" line traced through Shem. This does not mean that all the people in one line are evil and all in the other are good. These genealogies in some ways represent the outflow of Genesis 3:15 which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ who is a descendent of Seth, descendent of Shem.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the new beginning (post flood) compare and contrast with the first beginning (creation)
2. Does Genesis 9:6 provide an enduring basis for capital punishment? According to the text, what is the theological basis for capital punishment.
3. How is this covenant an expression of God's grace?
4. How does the behavior of Noah and Ham relate to the theme of the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent from Genesis 3:15
5. What can we learn from the story of Noah and Ham?
6. What is significant about the nations that are descended from Ham. How does this relate to the flow of biblical history.
7. In light of Genesis 5:28 and the story of Noah's drunkenness, how does this passage guide us in our attitude and use of alcohol?

Study 8: Nations Divided and Nation Created Gen 11:1-12:9

Interpretive Helps

Babel: This is the city of Babylon. The word Babel sounds like the Hebrew word for confused.

The Tower: A ziggurat was a tall brick staircase like tower often used as a temple. The point was not that this was a tall tower, but that these ziggurats, because of their height were considered a way to draw close to the gods and gain access to the heavens.

Interesting facts about Genealogies: The following table is based on the data from Genesis 5 and 11. The years of birth and death are years after creation. The year of the flood is 1656. The division of languages at Babel was approx 1755 (Gen 10:25)

Name	Age at Birth of son	Years lived After Son Born	Age at death	Born in Year	Died in year
Adam	130	800	930	0	930
Seth	105	807	912	130	1042
Enosh	90	815	905	235	1140
Kenan	70	840	910	325	1235
Mahalalel	65	830	895	395	1290
Jared	162	800	962	460	1422
Enoch	65	300	365	622	987
Methuselah	187	782	969	687	1656
Lamech	182	595	777	874	1651
Noah	500	450	950	1056	2006
Shem	100	500	600	1556	2156
Arphaxad	35	403	438	1656	2094
Shelah	30	403	433	1691	2124
Eber	34	430	464	1721	2185
Pelag	30	209	239	1755	1994
Reu	32	207	239	1785	2024
Serug	30	200	230	1817	2047
Nahor	29	119	148	1847	1995
Terah	70	135	205	1876	2081
Abram	100	75	175	1946	2121
Issac	60	120	180	2046	2226
Jacob				2106	

Interestingly Methuselah probably died in the flood. Adam was still alive when Noah's father was born. Noah was alive when Abram was born. Shem was still alive when Jacob was born.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the nature of the sin exhibited in the construction of the city and tower?
Can you see yourself in this story?
2. What does the story of Babel tell us about the value and danger of technology.
3. How is the call of Abram the antidote for what happened in Babel.
4. How does Jesus Christ fulfill the promises made to Abram in Genesis 12:2-3, 7?
5. In what ways did Abram express his faith in God.
6. Why is it appropriate that God called a man who was childless to be a great nation.
7. What does this passage tell us about God and the way he works in our lives.