

Genesis

*God's Grace
from the Beginning*

by Debbie Schmidt

**Nine studies for small groups and circles
on the first book of the Bible from the
Network of Presbyterian Women in Leadership**



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Introduction

Dysfunctional families, substance abuse, and gang violence—just some of the problems filling our headlines. It would be easy to think of them as new, but the truth is, these problems have been around for almost as long as humankind has walked the face of the earth. In the biblical account of Genesis, we see these same problems, and more, played out in the lives of our earliest forefathers and mothers. If you have not taken a close look at the book of Genesis since the days you heard these stories in Sunday school, you may be surprised or even shocked by what you are about to read!

As you dig into this first book of the Bible, you might be encouraged to see that even the heroes of our faith shared many of our weaknesses. Or you might feel discouraged that humanity's moral depravity is the same today as it was in the days of Adam and Eve. In either case you will also be able to see that God has been at work from the beginning to engage women and men in a loving and personal relationship.

Moses is considered to be the author of Genesis. His purpose was to give the fledgling nation of Israel a record of God's faithfulness to their ancestors and an understanding of their own history. As Christians, we share in this history; the story of God's relationship with Israel becomes our story as well.

Some scholars have said the Bible can be divided into three sections. The first section is Genesis 1 and 2, where God creates good things, including man and woman, and all is well. The second section begins with Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve disobey God and the relationship between God and humanity is broken. This second section comprises most of the rest of the Bible. It is the story of how God, in love and mercy, works in the world to contain the damage sin has done and establishes a relationship with a people,

Israel, who could know God and show God's love to the rest of the world. The climax of the second section comes as God enters the world in person as a human being: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ deals decisively with sin and death, making a way for women and men to enter once more into a relationship with God, even as we continue to live in a fallen world. The third section, like the first, consists of only two chapters, Revelation 21 and 22. Here we get a small glimpse of what the future holds. In these final chapters of the Bible, we see that sin and death are finally eliminated, and God and all God's people share a new heaven and a new earth in the joy of unending and unbroken community.

The book of Genesis sets the stage for much of what God does throughout the Bible. Sacrifices, covenants, baptism, and redemption all have their origins in the book of Genesis. Even the sacrificial death of Jesus is foreshadowed. More importantly, in the book of Genesis the character of God is revealed. So the powerful God who acted in history to bring the Hebrew people out of Egypt and make of them a great nation is the God we see in Genesis. The God who is described in the Psalms as "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love" is the God we meet in Genesis. The God who longs for a relationship with us and has made that possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ is the same God who reaches out in love to broken people in Genesis. The God we meet in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is the God we meet in Genesis. And the God who continues to enable and empower the church through the work of the Holy Spirit is the God who is at work in the book of Genesis.

It would be impossible to cover the entire book of Genesis in only nine lessons, and so this study will look at some of the highlights of the book. Since it is a story and the events between these high points are also important, each study will open with a summary of what has happened in the book since the last lesson. This section, "In the

Previous Episode,” will help you see the continuity of the story. It would be even better if you were able to set aside time between lessons to read the intervening chapters for yourself.

You may notice there is no discussion about whether some of the events in Genesis, such as creation and the flood, actually happened in the way they are described. Earnest Christians who affirm the authority of the Scriptures do not always agree on these points. While discussions about scientific creationism or the extent of the flood can be interesting and faith-building, they can also become divisive. This study does not focus on these issues but rather on the life lessons to be learned as we look at the relationships God has with the people of Genesis, and what we can see in this earliest of stories about the character of God.

In each lesson, we will also look at a New Testament passage that illustrates the full fruit of what appears in seminal form in the book of Genesis. This section, “The Rest of Story,” shows that God is truly the same yesterday, today, and always. The writer of Hebrews says of our biblical ancestors, they “died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” (Hebrews 11:13 NRSV) Many of the promises referred to by the Hebrews writer appear first in the book of Genesis. We as Christians have the privilege of knowing the fulfillment of those promises in the risen and living Christ. As we study Genesis, it is amazing and inspiring to see how the events recorded were, even while they were being written, laying the foundation for the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Debbie Schmidt
January 2006

Note: This study permits the use of a masculine pronoun for God with the understanding that all language is inadequate to describe God.

Meet the author

Debbie Schmidt teaches weekly Bible studies as part of the women's ministry at Central Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland, where her husband is senior pastor. Previously the Schmidts were on staff at First Presbyterian Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, served as PC(USA) mission co-workers in Japan for ten years, and worked with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in New Orleans. The Schmidts have two grown children. In her free time Debbie enjoys needlework, meeting friends for coffee, and exploring Maryland with her husband.

Lesson One

ADAM AND EVE

THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS

GETTING INTO THE STORY

If you were making a movie about the Garden of Eden, what would the garden look like? Would it be a jungle, an English country garden, a forest, or something entirely different? Take a minute and list some things you imagine might have been in the garden.

IN THE PREVIOUS STORY

As our story begins, God is present and has always been present in a way that our human minds cannot imagine. God is more than the subject of Genesis. God is the main subject, main character, and driving force behind all that happens in the entire Bible. God is the source of all good things past, present, and in the future. We pick up our story as God creates the vast reaches of space and our own planet Earth. God makes light and darkness and causes it to fall into an orderly pattern of night and day. God simply speaks and it all happens. This is described as the first day of God's creation.

On the second day, God speaks and an atmosphere is formed for the Earth. Water on the surface of the earth, rain, and moisture-filled

air all prepare the way for a planet that will support life. The next day God causes dry land to appear, and on that land he causes plants and trees of every kind to grow and reproduce. When God sees all this, God knows it is good!

On the fourth day, God speaks and seasons begin. The sun, moon, and stars fall into their God-appointed rhythms. Again God sees that everything is good. The next day, animal life begins to take shape. The waters are filled with swimming creatures and birds begin to fill the air. All creation is good to God. God tells the birds and the sea animals to prosper and become abundant.

On the sixth day, God speaks again and livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild beasts of every kind appear and begin to find their places on the earth. And God sees that it is good. Then God deliberates carefully and comes to a decision. His next creation will be unlike any other creation: it will be made to reflect the very nature of God. This creation will be given a purpose. It will be given authority. And it will be given the ability to have a spiritual relationship with its creator. And so God creates humanity, both man and woman, and gives them a special role in all creation. Human beings are appointed to maintain and order all God has created as they also reproduce and fill the earth. When God looks on all that has been created and sees the way in which it has been prepared to prosper, God knows that it is all very good!

On the seventh day, God rests. God makes the seventh day a special day, blessed and set apart.

THE STORY UNFOLDS

Genesis 1 gives us an overview of God's creative process. As we move into Genesis 2, some of the story is retold with more detail. It is a little like the first scene of some movies, when the camera pans over the activity of a whole city or community during the opening

7. How does God say their disobedience will alter their relationships with one another and with the rest of creation? What evidence do you see today of this alienation in marriages? In our relationship to the environment?

God acts to limit the impact of sin after Adam and Eve have chosen to disobey God. God prevents Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree of life, which would have made humanity's state of alienation from God a permanent condition. God also provides coverings for them. These coverings, made from the skins of animals that had been killed, not only cover Adam and Eve's shame but also foreshadow the ritual of sacrifices to atone for sin that God would establish for the nation of Israel. Those ritualistic sacrifices, in turn, foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ, the sacrifice that would finally and decisively deal with the separation between God and humanity.

So, in the midst of Adam and Eve's desperate situation, God still offers hope: the tree of life is not destroyed and the possibility of eternal life remains. In addition, God demonstrates his willingness to provide a means to restore men and women to fellowship with him in this first glimpse of the atonement that will come through Christ.

8. Verse 15 is considered to be the first prophecy in Scripture, pointing to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ—the offspring or seed of the woman. What glimmer of hope does it offer? What will be the cost?

THE REST OF THE STORY

We thank God that Genesis 3 is not the end of the story. Centuries passed but at last the time came when God again made a way for people to have a relationship with him through the saving work of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul writes, "...if anyone is in Christ, he [she] is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

(2 Corinthians 5:17) Paul explores some of the differences between the old way of death brought about by Adam and Eve and the new life of grace in Christ in Romans 5:12–21.

Read Romans 5:12–21.

9. Paul writes that Adam and Jesus each ushered in dramatic changes for humanity; Adam brought sin and death, Jesus brought life. How does Paul describe death that came through Adam? (See especially vv. 17–19.) What specific things can you add to Paul's description of sin and death based on your study of Genesis?

10. How does Paul describe the life that comes through Christ? (Focus especially on vv. 15–17.) In what ways does the life that comes through Christ counteract the results of sin and death we inherit from Adam?

Look up the definition of "justification" and put it into your own words.

11. What do you think it means to “reign in life through ... Jesus Christ”? (v. 17) Give a few examples of what this would look like in your daily life.

12. Christians have traditionally referred to the consequences of Adam and Eve’s disobedience as “the Fall.” The Fall resulted in three major areas of alienation: separation from God, separation from one another, and humanity at odds with the rest of creation. Christ has made a way for us to be restored to a righteous relationship with God, breaking the power of sin and death over our lives. How might we expect God’s “abundant provision of grace” to also change the way we relate to one another? To the rest of creation?