



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY (GENESIS - ESTHER) Lesson 2

Genesis 1-11 — The Beginnings of Humanity¹

There are no writings more important for the proper understanding of history and humanity than the first chapters of Genesis. Here the secret of human sinfulness is revealed. In these opening chapters of the Bible is the first revelation of divine redemption and grace. Here the essential groundwork is laid for the understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Genesis traces the story of humanity from its beginning within the natural world, and follows its history in a continually narrowing process down to the story of four great men of the past: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. But Genesis is not only history; it is also a book with a single message: *humanity's need for God*. Genesis reveals that people can never be complete without God, that we can never discover or fulfill the true meaning of our lives without a genuine and personal relationship with God.

Humanity in the Universe

Genesis opens with the greatest material fact in all human life—that we are living in a universe. We are living on a planet shared with billions of other human beings, and our planet is part of a solar system. The whole solar system—the sun with all its planets—is making its way through a great whirling body of stars called a galaxy. This galaxy is moving at incredible speed through the vastness of space in conjunction with countless other galaxies.

It is precisely at that point that the Bible opens: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). What a strange conjunction—to put all the vast heavens on one side and our tiny planet Earth on the other. But the book moves right on to tell us that humanity—insignificant humanity, we tiny specks of life living on a minor planet in the midst of this unthinkable vast universe—are the object of God’s concern.

God has made the physical universe to reveal spiritual reality. The first truth God would suggest to us, manifested in the material universe all around us, is that there is a heavenly as well as an earthly life. There is a difference between the heavenly life of God and the earthly life of humanity. The supreme subject of the Bible will be how to move from the level of earth to the life of the heavens. This differ-

ence is declared by Isaiah, where God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways...As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The Creation

We have seen that the greatest observable fact known to humanity is the existence of the universe. To this, Genesis 1:1 links the greatest fact made known by revelation—the existence of a God who creates. There is thus brought together at the beginning of the Bible a recognition of the two great sources of human knowledge—*nature*, discoverable by the five senses; and *revelation*, which is discoverable only by a mind and heart illuminated by the Spirit of God. Both of these sources of knowledge originate with God. Nature is designed to teach certain facts about God, but revelation is designed to bring us to the God about whom nature speaks.

Genesis 1:2 adds the information that the earth began as a planet covered by an uninterrupted ocean, which was itself wrapped in darkness. The revelation of Scripture says that the earth was “formless and empty.” It was simply one great, vast deep of water covering the whole world, with no life in it. With that picture science fully agrees. But the revelation of Scripture is a key factor that many scientists do not acknowledge. Scripture’s revelation says, “The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” God was at work in His universe, interacting and interrelating with it.

The first step God took was to create light. Light is absolutely essential to life. With the advent of light we are now ready for the record of the six days of creation. How are we to view these days? Are they 24-hour days, constituting one literal week, or do they represent long and indefinite ages of time? It is my conviction that the controversy which has endlessly raged upon this question has been largely responsible for missing the real purpose for which God gives to us this first chapter of Genesis.

God was moving toward a goal, which He had clearly in mind from the beginning. The steps God took to accomplish this goal are recorded as several great creative acts, occurring in progressive stages, which logically succeed one another. It did not all happen at once. God did not bring the world and the universe into being with a snap of His fingers or with one sentence from His lips. He chose to do it in stages, which are very clearly evident throughout this passage.

1. This is an overview. You can study Genesis in more detail in the Joy of Living study titled *Genesis*.

Genesis 1 introduces in physical symbolism the great themes that will be amplified throughout the rest of the book. In other words, there are great lessons that God has deeply etched in nature in order to remind us of corresponding realities in our lives. Let us go through the creative days from this point of view, and we will see what I believe to be the real point of this passage.

Day 1: Light and Darkness

Day one describes the creation of light and its separation from darkness. The light is said to be good and the darkness by definition is not good. Both these words, *light* and *darkness*, are used subsequently in Scripture to picture good and evil. Throughout our lives we will need to discern between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error. We are reminded of this distinction every day and night.

Day 2: The Expanse

On day two God created the “expanse” which separates the waters below from the waters above, and is called “sky.” Physically this is a description of the creation of the atmosphere around the earth, which supports great quantities of water in evaporated form above the earth and separates it from the oceans below. This ocean and sky, divided asunder, picture for us the reality of human physical life and a subsequent heavenly life. Human existence is not over when this earthly life is over. The two levels of human existence are tied together with invisible but very real links, and one merges into the other just as oceans, by evaporation, move into the waters of the air.

People have forgotten these two facts, revealed in the first two creative days, and this is the root cause for the violence and moral decline of our day. We no longer seek to distinguish between good and evil, between light and darkness. It is also evident that we no longer want to think about the life to come. We want everything now. Instant happiness! But we must remember that this present earthly life is only a part of the whole; that eternity—and all the good things God has planned for us—is stretching before us; and that the choices we make now will determine our experience of eternity.

Day 3: Land and Plant Life

Day three was a double day in which there was first, the emergence of the land from the oceans, and second, the appearance of life upon the earth in the form of plants, trees and vegetation. The truth God wants us to learn from this is that there is an old, fallen humanity—represented by the oceans—which by nature is incapable of bringing forth what God desires, but there is also a new, redeemed humanity—the land—called out of the old, which will be capable of producing the fruit God envisions. In the second part of the third day that fruit actually appeared and was pronounced by God to be good. This fruit was a result of the activity of the Spirit upon the barren waters, just as He also brings forth fruit from the redeemed believer. (See John 3:3-6 and Galatians 5:19-23.)

Day 4: Sun, Moon and Stars

Day four brought the creation of the sun, moon, and stars, and the placing of them as lights and signs to govern the seasons of earth. The sun clearly pictures Jesus Himself (foretold in Malachi 4:2 as “the

sun of righteousness”) as the light of the world. The moon, reflecting the brightness of the sun and shining in the darkness of the night, is a symbol of the church, the body of Christ, shining in the moral darkness of this world. The stars are used repeatedly in Scripture as symbols of individuals who shine with great moral influence upon others.

Day 5: Sea Creatures and Birds

The fifth day brought the creation of birds flying in the expanse above the earth, and of every living creature that moves in the waters of the seas. Since the atmosphere above depicts the heavenly kind of life and the waters are a picture of unregenerate humanity, this day of creation symbolizes to us the possibility of living triumphantly in either an alien or a hostile environment. The spiritual life is alien to natural humanity, but by the redemption of God we can “soar on wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:31). The world is a hostile environment to us, but we can learn to live in it as effectively as a fish learns to swim in the sea.

Day 6: Animals and Humanity

This sixth day was also a double day. During the first part of the day God created the land animals, followed by the creation of humanity. This is in exact accordance with the fossil records—people make their appearance last in the order of life. But there are some distinctive things said of us that are never said of any of the animal creation.

First, God held a divine consultation about humanity, saying, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). This divine conversation is the first hint given to us that God consists of more than one person.¹ This revelation is given only in connection with the emergence of people upon the earth.

The key fact about people is that we are made in the “image” and “likeness” of God. That image is found not in our body or in our personality, but in our *spirit*. For, as Jesus told the woman at the well in Samaria, “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). But what is godlike about our spirit? If the spirit is made in the image of God, then it can do things that God can do but no animal can. Three things are suggested throughout Genesis 1 which God does: He creates; He communicates; and He evaluates, pronouncing some things good and others not good. Likewise, we can create, we can communicate, and we have a moral sense, recognizing some things as good and others as bad.

However, though people have retained the *image*, we have now lost the *likeness* of God. Image is the capacity to be God-like, but likeness is the proper functioning of that capacity. Adam not only had the ability to be creative, to communicate, to make moral choices—but he actually exercised the function of God-likeness. The secret, as we learn from the rest of Scripture, lay in an inner dependence on God that continually repudiated self-confidence.

Day 7: Rest

The seventh day was quite different from all the preceding six. There was no movement from incompleteness to completeness. It was, instead, a day characterized by rest; God ceased His labors,

1. The doctrine of the Trinity means that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

intending it to be a picture of what is called later in Scripture the “rest” of faith. Hebrews 4:10 declares, “For anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”

Here is pictured the principle of human behavior by which God intends us to operate, and which was His intention from the very beginning of history. It is from this principle that people fell, and it is to this principle in Jesus Christ that we are to be restored. It is the principle of human activity resting upon an indwelling God to produce extraordinary results.

Man and Woman

Genesis chapter 2 finds the man walking in the Garden of Eden in communion with God. At this point, God gives him a research project—to investigate the animal world in search for a possible counterpart to himself. God knew that the man would not find what he was looking for, but in the process the man discovered at least four marvelous truths.

First, he learned that woman was not to be a mere beast of burden as the animals are, because that would not in any way fulfill his need for a helper and companion.

Second, woman was not to be merely a biological laboratory for the producing of children. This is what the animals use sex for, but that was not sufficient for Adam’s needs. Human sex, therefore, is different from that among the animals.

Third, Adam learned that woman was not a thing outside himself—she is not something to be used at the whim of a man and then disposed of. She is to be a helper, fit for him, corresponding to him.

So, we are told that Adam fell into a deep sleep, and God took one of his ribs and from it made a woman and brought her to him. This period of Adam’s unconsciousness strongly suggests that the relationship of marriage is far deeper than mere surface affection. It touches not only the conscious life, but the subconscious, even the unconscious as well.

Chapter 2 ends with a marvelous statement of the principles God intends for marriage:

- ☛ First, marriage involves a complete *identity* of the partners. The two are to become one. This is a growing process as a couple lives together, merging their lives both physically and emotionally, and creating a single history.
- ☛ The second principle is that of *headship*, which marks the role of the man as the leader in determining the direction in which a home should go, and the woman’s responsibility to support and sustain that leadership.
- ☛ The third factor is that of *permanence*. Men and women are to be united to one another—he is to stay with her and she with him, because marriage is a permanent bond.

- ☛ The fourth factor is revealed in the verse, “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). This speaks clearly of openness and free *communication*.

Humanity’s Limitation

In chapter 3 of Genesis we find the explanation for the whole history of human heartache and misery. Remove this chapter from the Bible, and the rest of it is beyond explanation. But the most striking thing about it is that we find ourselves in this chapter. The temptation and the fall are reproduced in our lives many times a day. We have all heard the voice of the tempter and felt the drawing of sin, and we all know the pangs of guilt that follow.

It was clearly the devil, in his character as an angel of light, who confronted the woman in the Garden of Eden. His tactic with her was to arouse desire. First he implanted in her heart a distrust of God’s love, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” (Genesis 3:1). Next, he dared to deny openly the results that God had stated would occur, “You will not surely die,” he said (Genesis 3:4). Then he clinched his attack with a distorted truth, “God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

The result was that Eve took the fruit and ate. But there was still hope for the human race. Adam had not yet fallen, only Eve. A battle had been lost, but not the war. In the innocent but ominous words, “She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Genesis 3:6), we face the beginning of the darkness of a fallen humanity. What the Bible calls “death” immediately followed.

The first sign of death at work in human life was that Adam and Eve knew they were naked. This was the birth of self-consciousness, and the immediate result was an attempt to cover up. The second mark of death was the tendency to hide. It revealed the fact of guilt—that inner torment we are all familiar with, which cannot be turned off no matter how hard we try. The third mark of death was the beginning of blame—the passing of the buck from Adam to Eve, and from Eve to the serpent. Behind both excuses was the unspoken suggestion that it was really God’s fault. Thus they attempted to turn guilt into fate and make of themselves mere innocent victims suffering from a breakdown in creation for which God was responsible. The fourth mark of death was the divine establishment of the limits of life: pain, sweat and death. Adam and Eve must learn the hard cruel facts of life lived apart from an intimate relationship with God.

At this point, God clothed them with animal skins as a picture—as all animal sacrifices are—to teach us the great truth that ultimately it is God Himself who bears eternally the agony of our sin. This was followed by banishment from the Garden.

The Beginning of Human Society

In Genesis chapters 4-11, relating early human history, we also see the underlying threads of all human society for all time. Without doubt there was a real Cain, there was a genuine 40-day deluge, there

was an ark made of cypress wood, and there was an actual tower of babbling confusion. There is no need to question the historicity of these events, but they are recorded to teach us graphically the principles on which humanity has built society and the inherent flaws in those principles.

History as we know it is the story of wars, battles, and the bloodshed of people. The key to this eternal struggle actually lies in the story that took place at the dawn of history—the story of two brothers: Cain and Abel. The focus of the story is in the two offerings which these brothers brought to God. Abel's offering of a lamb was accepted and Cain's offering of grain was rejected. Surely the commentators are right in indicating that God's reason for rejecting Cain's offering was that it was a bloodless offering, and therefore could not take away sin, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22).¹

Cain was angry at God's action, and when given opportunity to repent refused to do so. Thus, when he later found himself in the field with his brother Abel, Cain's jealousy took over, and Abel died, murdered by his brother's hand. Thus the roots of human warfare are seen to lie in the jealous and envious spirit in the heart, and in the ease with which we utter Cain's contemptuous words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9).

The blood of Abel cried from the ground for justice, and God answered by placing a curse on Cain. The ground would no longer yield crops to him, and he would therefore be forced to wander from place to place. To protect Cain from excess punishment, God set a mark upon him. It was not a mark of shame, as many interpret it, but a mark of grace by which God was saying, "This man is still my property; he is guilty, he is a murderer, but he is still mine, and don't forget it."

The Expansion of Civilization

The next element traced in Genesis was the beginning of civilization. To Cain was born Enoch, who built a city. From the descriptions of Enoch's descendants, we see that within the city were found all the ingredients of modern life—travel, music and the arts, the use of metals, the organized political life, and the domestication of animals. Polygamy appeared with Lamech and his two wives. Violence and murder were justified on the grounds of self-defense.

But in the midst of this deterioration God had another plan already underway. Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth. Through Seth's descendants the Savior of the world would come. Genesis 5 traces the beginning of this redemptive work of God. The focus of the chapter is Enoch, who learned to walk in fellowship with God in the midst of a godless and violent generation.

1. Although there is no record of God instructing Cain and Abel regarding the type of offering they were to bring, we know that God's message does not contradict itself. Surely His communication to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, was in harmony with what He says throughout the Bible. In Genesis 3 God covered Adam and Eve's nakedness—brought about by not believing and obeying God—by the shedding of the blood of an animal. This is the first record of the shedding of blood and it pointed to the coming Savior who would die for the sin of the world. All through the Old Testament communication and worship took place with the sacrifice of a lamb being presented.

God's Judgment

When "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" (Genesis 6:5), God announced to Noah that He intended to judge the world, and He commanded Noah to build an ark of safety which would be his means of deliverance from the coming catastrophe. When the ark was completed, Noah was invited to enter it with all his family, also bringing two of every kind of animal and seven of clean animals. Noah demonstrated his faith by building and entering the ark in obedience to the word of God, against the ridicule and contempt of his contemporaries.

So the flood came. The whole earth was covered to the tops of the mountains and all life perished except the handful of humans and animals in the ark, and those marine animals which could survive in the waters. The rain continued for 40 days and nights and then ceased. After 150 days the waters began to abate, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The emergence of Noah from the ark is intended to be a picture of the new beginning of life which every Christian experiences when he enters into the resurrection life of Jesus Christ by the new birth.

God's Intervention

Chapter 9 of Genesis records a covenant made with Noah, but also with all humanity. This covenant contained God's provision for the ordering of human life. First, nature was made to be dependable, secured by the promise of the rainbow from universal catastrophe. Second, humanity's rule over the animal world through fear was disclosed, and animals were given to people as food, along with plant life. Third, human life was seen to be so sacred that only God had the right to take it, except in the case of a murderer, in which case God used the organized system of government as His instrument (see Romans 13:3-4). Thus a foundation was laid for police work and capital punishment. Fourth, the command was given, once again, to multiply and populate the earth.

Genesis 10 continues the narrative of the flood, giving us an account of the offspring of Noah's sons, the nations that sprang from them and the general location where they settled. Genesis 11 gives the detailed account of how this dispersion of the nations came about. All people had one language. As they moved eastward they settled in the land of Shinar or Babylonia. They soon discovered they could invent their own materials for building, and they were fired with desire to build two things—a city and a tower—to keep from being scattered over the face of the whole earth, in direct contrast to God's command to populate the earth.

God took note of their unity and their creativity and stated, "Nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). For humanity's sake, to keep them from destroying themselves by ignorant ambition, God confused their language, and people were scattered over the face of the earth. Thus the atmosphere of this time became one of movement and migration—people thrusting out from the center like spokes of a wheel radiating out into the corners of the earth.

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Commentary on Genesis 1-11.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the commentary on Genesis 1-11 or from your teacher’s lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

3. This week’s questions focus on Genesis 12-50. If you have time, you may want to read through the entire passage this week. As you answer the questions, you will be looking up passages of Scripture from various places in the Bible. This will help you discover that God’s Word is a “whole,” and that His message to us is the same from Genesis to Revelation.

Second Day:

In Genesis 1-11 we learned of the creation and the fall of the human race. In chapters 12-50 we will see the beginning of God’s plan to redeem humanity: the call of one man, Abraham, from whose offspring the Savior—Jesus Christ—would come (see Romans 9:5). In this lesson we will discover what it takes to please God, and we will see that quality in action.

1. a. Summarize God’s promise to Abraham (Abram) in Genesis 12:1-3. (You can read the entire story of Abraham in Genesis 11:26—25:10.)

b. Read Hebrews 11:8. How was Abraham able to be obedient to this call from God?

2. Read Hebrews 11:11-12 (the full story is in Genesis 17-21). What problem did Abraham and Sarah have? Summarize the blessing God gave to them despite this seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

3. Read Hebrews 11:17-19 (the full story is in Genesis 22). How was Abraham tested, and what did he believe God would do?

4. Read Galatians 3:8-9, 16, 22, and 26, and summarize what God did for humanity through Abraham. What is the key element a person must have in order to partake of these promises?

5. Personal: As we see above, we become children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Read and summarize Romans 5:8-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. What does this mean to you personally?

Third Day:

1. Isaac was the child promised to Abraham through whom the promised blessings would be fulfilled (see Romans 9:7-9). You can read Isaac's complete story in Genesis 17:19—35:29. Isaac shared in the faith of his father Abraham. What promise did God give to Isaac in Genesis 26:2-4? How does this compare to the blessing given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3?
2. Read Hebrews 11:20 (the full story is in Genesis 27). How was Isaac able to bless his sons, Jacob and Esau, regarding God's promises for their future?
3. What promise did God give to Jacob in Genesis 28:10-14? How did this compare to the promises God gave to Abraham and then to Isaac?
4. Although Jacob was a schemer and thought he could live by his own efforts, God, in His grace, brought Jacob to a place where he finally gave up and trusted Him. God changed his name from Jacob to Israel (see Genesis 32:28).¹ Jacob continued to live by faith. What do you learn about this in Hebrews 11:21? (Jacob's full story is in Genesis 25-49.)
5. a. Each of these men, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are commended for their faith in Hebrews 11. They believed God's promises to them and lived accordingly. What do you learn about faith from Hebrews 11:6?

b. Read Jeremiah 29:13. What will be the result of seeking God earnestly and with all our heart?
6. Personal: What is your current relationship with God? Are you satisfied with your relationship with Him? What are you doing about it?

1. Jacob means "he grasps the heel" or "he deceives," and Israel means "he struggles with God." (*The NIV Study Bible*. See text notes on Genesis 25:26, 32:28.)

Fourth Day:

1. a. Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons. How did Jacob (Israel) feel about Joseph and why? (Genesis 37:3a)

b. From Genesis 37:3b how did he show his partiality?
2. How did Joseph's brothers feel about this? (Genesis 37:4)
3. Read Genesis 37:28,36. As a result of his brothers' envy, what eventually happened to Joseph, and where did he end up?
4. a. Jacob was a man who loved God and had faith in Him. His sons were the forefathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. But none of them were perfect. Jacob showed favoritism. What does James 2:9 say about favoritism?

b. The brothers were envious. What does James 3:16 say regarding envy?
5. a. The fact that a person loves and believes God does not mean he or she is perfect. What does Romans 3:23 say regarding this?

b. What problem does this create for every person, and what is God's remedy?

c. Personal: If you have not yet accepted this gift, won't you do it right now?
6. Personal: When we come to God by way of Jesus Christ, He doesn't just forgive our sins, but He also begins to change us to become like Himself (see Romans 8:29). What difference does this make to you?

Fifth Day:

1. a. Joseph went through many difficult trials in his life. (You can read his full story in Genesis 30:22—50:26.) Read Acts 7:9-10a. Who was with Joseph in Egypt and rescued him from his troubles?

b. From Acts 7:10b, what did God give to Joseph, and what did He enable him to do? What was the result?

2. From Acts 7:11-12, what brought Joseph's brothers (referred to here as "our fathers") to Egypt?
3. From Acts 7:13-14, summarize how Jacob and his entire family ended up in Egypt.
4. Read Genesis 45:9-11 and describe what Joseph did for his father, his brothers, and their families.
5. God used Joseph to save his entire extended family, and thus saved the nation through whom the Savior would come. What truth does Joseph share in Genesis 50:20 that can encourage us when people do wrong to us?
6. Personal: Romans 8:28 expresses the same truth. In what ways does this change your attitude toward the situations in your life?

Sixth Day:

We have learned that Genesis is the beginning of God's revelation of Himself to humanity. There are those who say that since there is only one God, all the religions of the earth worship Him, each in their own way. According to the Bible this is not true.

1. Read Exodus 3:15. How does God refer to Himself? How long is He to be known this way?
2. What does Deuteronomy 4:39 say regarding the Lord?
3. Read John 14:6. What did Jesus say regarding our relationship with God the Father?
4. Personal: Have you ever had a discussion with someone about these things? Perhaps you have also believed that all religions worship the same deity. How has God's Word changed your understanding?
5. Personal: Describe in your own words what you've learned in the overview of Genesis. What difference it is making in your life?