

Introduction to Genesis

Genesis is among the Old Testament books quoted or alluded to most frequently in the New Testament (alongside Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Psalms). It is a book concerned with origins, relating the beginnings both of God's creation (chapters 1–11) and of God's people (chapters 12–50), and this may help explain its enduring popularity.

There seems to be a natural human inclination to tell stories about beginnings to help explain current circumstances: Parents might recount stories of their children as toddlers to explain their personality or behavior as adults. Nations will retell origin stories about their founders that reinforce certain values and identity markers that they believe are constitutive of their people. Genesis is no different. For more than two millennia, God's people have told and interpreted the stories of Genesis in an attempt to better understand God's world and their place within it. Because Genesis is a composite text written by many scribes over several centuries, we see that process of discernment even within the book itself.

As with cherished family tales and national origin myths, the stories of Genesis and their legacies are disputed. Christian readers of Genesis today continue the tradition of interpretation and contestation when we read it together with the Holy Spirit. Genesis becomes for us a lexicon of narratives wherein we find shared language for discovering who God has made us to be and how we are to relate to others in God's creation, both human and nonhuman.

This Together by Grace Bible Conversation contains eight sessions:

The first session is Genesis 1:1—2:4a, the famous story of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh. In the modern era, theological readings of this text have suffered due to a perceived dichotomy between faith and reason. In contrast, this session invites participants to consider the manifold ways we might read Genesis 1 “after Darwin” that are theologically generative without being intellectually irresponsible.

The second session is Genesis 3:1–24, the story of Eve, Adam, and the talking serpent. Through attentive reading, we discover that fragmented and unequal relationships between God, humans, and creation are not *prescriptions* for the way the world ought to be, but rather *descriptions* of what happens because of sin. We are not destined to live with the consequences of past mistakes, however, but called to participate in God's restoration of what has been broken.

Session 3 tells an abridged version of the flood story: Genesis 6:9–14; 7:11; 8:1–3a; 9:1–17. This story tragically demonstrates a fundamental mechanism within

God's creation: Human sin results in environmental devastation. Even so, God preserves a remnant to start again. God's concluding promise never again to send a flood, even when humans inevitably fail, reveals yet another relational truth of creation: God is willing to change when humans will not.

Session 4 is the story of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:1-6. This disarmingly simple story of Abraham gazing at the night sky and hearing from God has long entranced Jewish and Christian interpreters alike for its textured and suggestive imagery: What does it mean to have descendants like the stars (v. 5)? Will they be numerous? Will they also shine? The apostle Paul and Martin Luther alike were absorbed by another consequential phrase in this text: "[Abram] believed the LORD, and [he] reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6).

Session 5 turns to Genesis 21:1-21. Hagar, a woman enslaved and abused by her master and mistress, is cast out of her bondage with her son Ishmael and left for dead in the wilderness. As with God's people in the desert, God intervenes by providing for Hagar and Ishmael, eventually blessing them with descendants and prosperity. While the legacies of God's chosen family have always been contested among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, civility and coexistence are historically more common than irreconcilable conflict among these so-called "Abrahamic" faiths—a reality that reflects familial relations within Genesis itself.

Session 6, Genesis 29:15—30:24, is an account of how God's chosen family grew into the twelve tribes of Israel. This story features not only Jacob but also his four wives: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. As with several other scripture texts in this *Together by Grace* study, this story reveals how marriages and family dynamics in the Bible are diverse and not always models to be emulated. Even within difficult relational and social structures, however, faithful people can participate in the persistence of God's promises.

In session 7, Genesis 32:3-32, we ask a troubling question: Is it fair that God so often picks favorites in the Bible, and do these chosen ones actually deserve it? In this story, Jacob wrestles with God (or God's agent) and receives both a renewed blessing and a new name. But with this favor come special responsibilities, as well as some costs.

Session 8 concludes the study by exploring themes of reconciliation in Genesis 50:15-26. Did Joseph really "forgive and forget" after his brothers sold him into slavery and death? Should we expect him to? Ultimately, Joseph chose peace over vengeance when he reassured his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (v. 20), but we do not know how much or in what ways God's chosen family was reconciled as they fulfilled God's higher purpose.