



# Genesis 1–12

Prepared by Allen Browne

Version 2025-02-05



**RIVERVIEW  
CHURCH**

Prepared by Allen Browne for Riverview Church, 2026.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from *The New International Version*, copyright Zondervan (2021).

For information on Riverview Church, visit:

<https://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/>

# Contents

<b>Week 1: Establishing God's earthly realm (Genesis 1–2)</b>	<b>5</b>
Genesis 1: "And God said ..."	8
Genesis 2: Life in God's garden	13
So what?	20
<b>Week 2: Trust and treachery (Genesis 3–4)</b>	<b>23</b>
Genesis 3: The question of trust	23
Genesis 4: The question of justice	29
So what?	35
<b>Week 3: The identity of God's family (Genesis 5–6)</b>	<b>37</b>
Genesis 5: The family that trusts God	37
Genesis 6: Losing our identity	41
So what?	46
<b>Week 4: The partnership that saves (Genesis 7–8)</b>	<b>47</b>
Genesis 7: Ruined	47
Genesis 8: Rescued	49
Flood stories in the ancient world	52
So what?	54
<b>Week 5: Re-establishing his realm (Genesis 9–10)</b>	<b>55</b>
Genesis 9: God remakes the world	55
Genesis 10: The nations	60
So what?	63
<b>Week 6: A tale of two kingdoms (Genesis 11–12)</b>	<b>65</b>
Genesis 11: A kingdom trying to take God's world	65
Genesis 12: A kingdom representing God to the world	70
So what?	76



## Week 1: Establishing God's earthly realm (Genesis 1–2)

“We can’t be friends” was Ariana Grande’s most popular song in 2024. It begins:

I didn't think you'd understand me  
How could you ever even try? ...  
We can’t be friends ...

What is she saying? Is she choosing to break up because the bloke doesn’t understand her? It may sound like that at the start, but by the end we realize she wants to be more than friends. She’s feeling misunderstood and rejected, but waiting for him to change his mind and love her again. The refrain at the end is:

I’ll wait for your love.

Even best friends misunderstand each other. We make assumptions about what the person is saying. We hear part of the message and miss the main thing. We don’t recognize the irony, or how this conversation connects with yesterday’s.

The chance of misunderstanding is greater when we don’t know someone well. With someone who comes from another *culture*, or another *language*, or another *time*, we’ve got work to do to understand who they are, what they’re saying, and what that means.

All those issues are present when we come to the Bible. All sixty-six books come to us from another culture, another language, and another time. We misunderstand them when we read them through Western eyes, though the dynamics of our culture and the assumptions of our time.<sup>1</sup>

That’s why people divide up over how to read Genesis. We misunderstand it when we expect it to answer our questions about science and history, instead of hearing what it is talking about. Commentator Gordon Wenham said it well:

Though historical and scientific questions may be uppermost in our minds as we approach the text, it is doubtful whether they were in the writer’s mind, and we should therefore be cautious about looking for answers to questions he was not concerned with. Genesis is primarily about God’s character and his purposes for sinful mankind. Let us beware of allowing our interests to divert us from the central thrust of the book, so that we miss what the LORD, our creator and redeemer, is saying to us.<sup>2</sup>

Scripture is not a revelation about science. It’s a revelation of God. When we focus on the wrong questions, we miss the one who is revealed in Scripture, and then we end up fighting with each other.

That’s especially true of Genesis 1. People argue over how the Genesis account of creation and the scientific account of origins fit together. Some views:

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Randolph Richards, and Brandon J. O’Brien. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Inc., 1987), liii.

1. **The Bible is true, and science is wrong where it doesn't agree.** Young earth creationists such as Ken Ham<sup>3</sup> believe the universe was created in six literal days, just a few thousand years ago.
2. **The Bible and science both say the same thing.** Hugh Ross<sup>4</sup> believes the Bible gives us scientific information about a universe that's ancient. For example, Isaiah 42:5 says "the Creator of the heavens ... stretched them out," and Hugh Ross identifies this statement with the inflation of the universe that followed the Big Bang.
3. **The Bible and science give us information about different things.** Francis Collins<sup>5</sup> is a Nobel-prize winning biologist who helped unravel how DNA works. He wrote *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. In 2020 he was awarded the Templeton Prize for "harnessing the power of the sciences to explore the deepest questions of the universe and humankind's place and purpose within it."

I (Allen) personally started out supporting the young-earth creationists (#1 above). Over time, I realized that the Bible didn't fit my view of it. To honour the text, I had to change my view.

Let's take a New Testament example. According to Mark 4:31, Jesus called a **mustard seed** "*the smallest of all the seeds on earth.*" If you think Jesus was making a statement about biology, then he was wrong and the Bible contains errors.

Jesus went on to describe the mustard seed growing into "*the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree*" (Matthew 13:32). That's also wrong. Mustard seeds grow into good-sized garden shrubs, but not trees. Jesus made two biological errors in one story, and your Bible has multiple errors. If you think the Bible teaches science, that's the conclusion you're forced to accept.

Once you realize the Bible is not teaching science, you can listen to hear what Jesus was saying. If you were buying mustard seeds at the market and one little seed fell off the scales, you wouldn't worry about it. What's one seed? But that one little seed can grow to fill your garden, and Jesus said the kingdom of God is like that. If Jesus is God's Anointed (Messiah), the kingdom was arriving in him (the king)! His audience knew that Israel was meant to be God's garden, though it had been overrun by foreign powers (Psalm 80; Isaiah 5 etc). God was restoring his reign in his anointed.

And then comes the unexpected twist in Jesus' story. The little kingdom that was coming to life in Christ would grow into something no one expected: a *tree* far bigger than God's garden—a *tree so large that the birds come and perch in its branches* (Matthew 13:32). This was language that the big kingdoms used to describe their power (compare Daniel 4:12, 14, 21). The little mustard seed becomes the kingdom of God: far bigger than a garden, it fills the whole world! Wow!

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://answersingenesis.org/bios/ken-ham/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://reasons.org/team/hugh-ross>

<sup>5</sup> <https://biologos.org/people/francis-collins>. For a sample see "Debating Evolution, Genetics and God" (Premier Unbelievable, 27 December 2024) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzna0mwwenk>

Jesus' story is not bad biology; it's messianic hope.<sup>6</sup> Any attempt to make it fit science misses the point. When we try to make Scripture say something it never set out to say, we distort it into something it is not, and we miss what it is saying.

So, what is Genesis 1 about? If it's not a science text, **what is it saying?**

### ***Israel's story***

All Scripture reveals God. The Old Testament is God's interaction with his people Israel. Israel had a unique relationship with God, established through the Sinai covenant. The LORD freed them from human rule (Pharaoh), and formed them into the first kingdom of God on earth. This foundational story is in Exodus.

Genesis is the prequel. Why did God send Moses to rescue them? *God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with **Abraham**, with **Isaac** and with **Jacob*** (Exodus 2:24). Genesis is the backstory: God calling Israel's ancestors:

- Abraham (Genesis 12–25)
- Isaac (Genesis 25–36)
- Jacob, with his twelve sons who became the twelve tribes (Genesis 37–50).

But Genesis doesn't start with Abraham. It starts with God's relationship to the world. Genesis 1–11 makes the astounding claim that **the God of Israel is the God of all people**.

In the beginning, God established ... not just Israel! The *heavens and earth* are his. It was *formless and empty* until God gave it shape and significance. God's decrees gave it form and function.<sup>7</sup> The heavenly sovereign declared how things were to be, empowering creation to be fruitful.

So, who is this God? And what can we know of God if God is in heaven and we are on earth? How does he govern the world? How does he care for and protect his earthly creatures? What's our place in his world? And what if we resist his authority?

Genesis 1–11 addresses the foundational issues of God's authority. It's a prelude to Israel's history. It's the account of heaven and earth in God's care, how the earthly realm turned from God, and how God responded. It explains why there are nations with their own rulers, and why God called Abraham to establish a different kind of nation.

That's what we're covering in the next six weeks. Any questions before we begin?

.....

.....

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://allenbrowne.blog/2018/04/16/the-little-seed-that-filled-the-world/>

<sup>7</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 21–34.

## Genesis 1: “And God said ...”

Genesis 1:1-5 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

<sup>3</sup> And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup> God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

This is a revelation of God: *In the beginning, God ... And God said ...* The revelation of God is framed in words that meant something to the Hebrews, so we must understand what they meant by terms like *heavens* (sky), *earth* (land), *deep* (seas), and *firmament* (vault between the heavens and the earth).

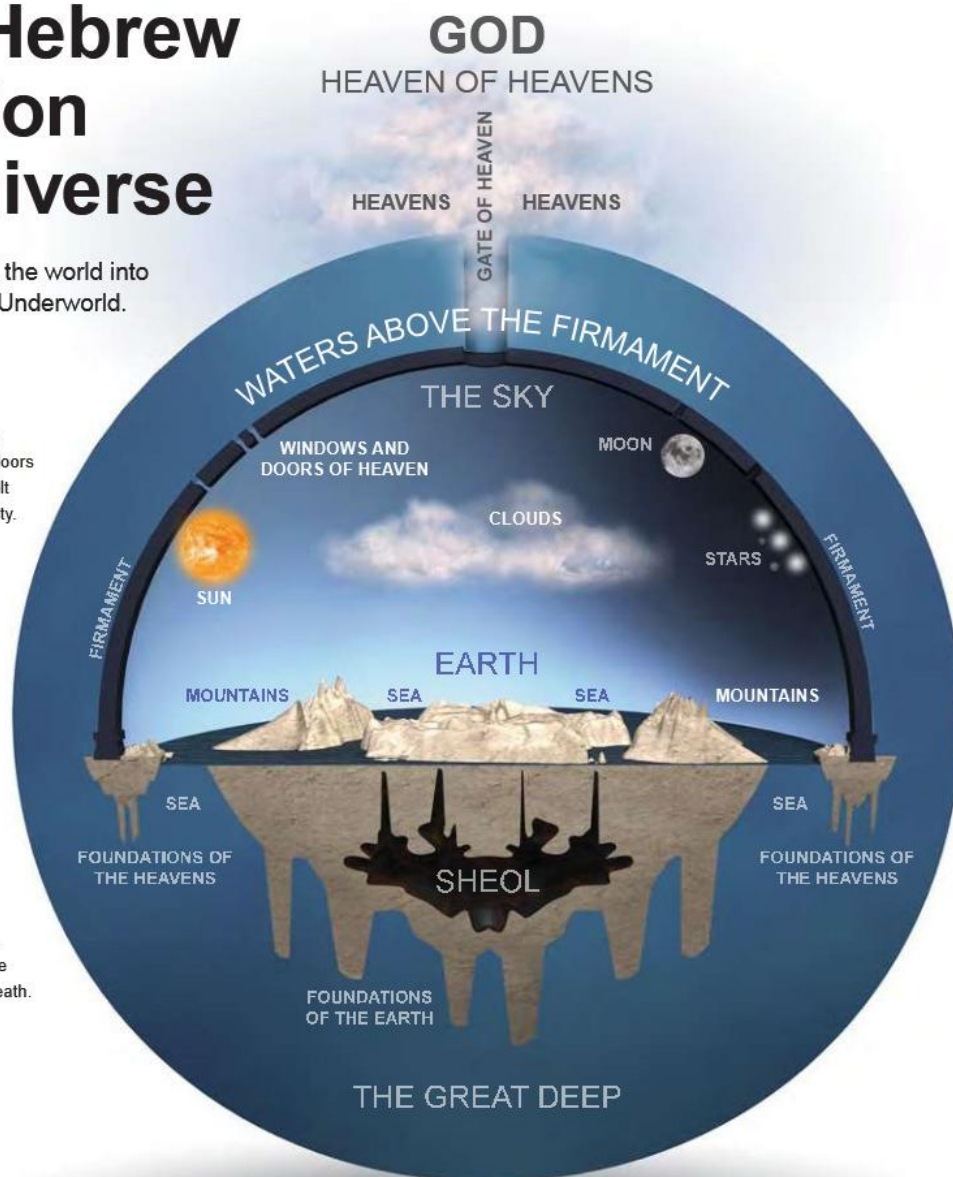
## Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe

The ancient Israelites divided the world into Heaven, Earth, Sea, and the Underworld.

They viewed the sky as a vault resting on foundations—perhaps mountains—with doors and windows that let in the rain. God dwelt above the sky, hidden in cloud and majesty.

The world was viewed as a disk floating on the waters, secured or moored by pillars. The earth was the only known domain—the realm beyond it was considered unknowable.

The Underworld (Sheol) was a watery or dusty prison from which no one returned. Regarded as a physical place beneath the earth, it could be reached only through death.



GRAPHIC BY KARBEL MULTIMEDIA,  
COPYRIGHT 2012 LOGOS BIBLE SOFTWARE



They did not see the *earth* as a planet orbiting the sun at 30 km/sec. They did not see the *sun* as a star orbiting the Milky Way galaxy. They did not see the *moon* as a satellite orbiting the earth.

The world as they saw it consists of the *sky* and the *ground*—the *heavens* and the *earth* (verse 1). Things that were not limited to the ground were in the heavens. They spoke of *the birds of the heavens* (Genesis 1:20, 26, 28, 30 ESV) and *the stars of the heavens* (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4) because birds and stars pass overhead. They spoke of *the God of heaven* because God is not limited to living on the ground (Genesis 22:17; 24:3, 7; 28:12, 17).

In addition to the *sky* and the *ground*, there was the *deep*—the waters below us (verse 2). We know the oceans plunge to 3,682 meters, but to them *the deep* felt threatening and unfathomable (Genesis 7:11; 9:2; Exodus 15:5, 8), like the realm of the dead (Ezekiel 31:15). The deep had a dark face (*darkness was over the face of the deep*), yet it was not outside God's control: *The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters* (verse 2 ESV).

God is sovereign over everything: in the heavens, on the earth, and in the deep. The opening claim of the Jewish Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) is that creation receives its shape and significance through God's decrees. **And God said**—that's the main point of Genesis 1 (repeated in verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, and 29).

God's decrees put everything in their right place:

#### Genesis 1:6-8 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." <sup>7</sup> So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. <sup>8</sup> God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

Ask a teenager to sort out their room, and they probably start by separating things—like clean clothes from dirty ones. God's decrees separate things that should be kept **separated**: *the light from the dark* (verse 4), *the waters above from the waters below* (verses 6-7), *the day from the night* (verse 15), and *the light from the dark* (verse 18). The Torah continues to separate what is holy from what is unholy, what is common from what is clean. This is central to Israel's identity:

#### Leviticus 20:24b-26 (ESV)

<sup>24</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who has **separated** you from the peoples. <sup>25</sup> You shall therefore **separate** the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by ... anything ... which I have **set apart** for you to hold unclean. <sup>26</sup> You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have **separated** you from the peoples, that you should be mine."

This separation results in everything being in its right place:

#### Genesis 1:9-13 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

What God called *Day* and *Night* do not encroach on each other (verses 5, 14). The waters in the sky and the waters in the deep are held apart (verses 7-8), so what God called the *Seas* and the *Land* do not encroach on each other (verse 9-10). That's how it remains while the creational order holds. But if the earth was "corrupted" ... well, that's another story (Genesis 6:11-17; 7:10-11).

With everything prepared, God gives life:

<sup>11</sup> Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup> And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

God's decree enables life on earth. Three times we're told that God decreed *fruitfulness* (verses 11-12, 22, 28-29). Every meaningful enterprise on earth—every farm, every business, every family, every nation—ultimately relies on this decree.

As we'll discover, resisting the order established by God introduces disorder. The earth produces thorns and thistles, and life falls back into the ground (3:17-19). God's nation will be born because God made Abraham and Sarah fruitful (17:6, 20; 18:10-14; 21:1-7). God-given fruitfulness is crucial to the story (9:7; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:4; 49:3).

God gives life! That message echoes through the whole Bible.

### **Support system: Days 4–6 (1:14-31)**

God now set up two signs that earth is under heaven's authority:

#### **Genesis 1:14-19 (NIV)**

<sup>14</sup> And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as **signs** to mark sacred times, and days and years, <sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so.

<sup>16</sup> God made two great lights—the greater light to **govern** the day and the lesser light to **govern** the night. He also made the stars. <sup>17</sup> God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, <sup>18</sup> to **govern** the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good.

<sup>19</sup> And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

In the dome of the heavens, the sun and the moon serve as *signs* that *govern* life on earth. Heaven directs our workdays and Sabbath, as God worked six days and rested on the seventh. Heaven marks the months and seasons of our year, the *sacred times* that were the festivals of Israel's calendar (Leviticus 23; Deuteronomy 16).

God set up creation with *lights in the sky* to signify that earth is **governed** by heaven. It's a word used of governing a kingdom (e.g. Jeremiah 34:1; 51:28; Daniel 11:5; Micah 4:8). The lights in the heavens remind us that we live under God's reign, that **earth is a kingdom of heaven**. That was Israel's uniqueness in Old Testament times. That's what Jesus came to restore for the whole world. The one who sits on the throne restores creation because he is faithful and true (Revelation 21:5).

Having established the kingdom, God now puts the living creatures in place:

**Genesis 1:20-25 (NIV)**

<sup>20</sup> And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” <sup>21</sup> So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>22</sup> God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” <sup>23</sup> And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. <sup>25</sup> God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

The emphasis is on each creature being in its right place, its assigned domain:

- **the waters**, teeming with living things and huge sea creatures
- **the heavens**, where birds fly across the dome of the sky
- **the land**, where domestic livestock, crawling creatures, and wild animals live.

With everything in place, God prepares a creature to manage the earth on his behalf:

**Genesis 1:26-31 (NIV)**

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

<sup>29</sup> Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. <sup>30</sup> And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

<sup>31</sup> God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

God wants to share his *dominion*, so he creates the human with authority to represent God to creation. It was common in the ancient world for a ruler to set up an *image* in the kingdom so people knew who their ruler was. But the Life-giver's image cannot be made of stone: only a living image can represent the living God!

The *male* and *female* humans *image* God. **Equally and jointly**, they are given authority to exercise God's *dominion* in his earthly realm. They are commissioned to manage all God's creatures in the domains where God put them: *the fish in the sea, and the birds in the sky, and the land creatures on the land* (verse 28).

But what are we not given authority over? God gave us dominion over the other creatures, but not over each other. The kingdom of God established in Genesis 1 has God ruling over humans, and humans ruling over the other creatures on his behalf. God is very pleased with this arrangement. What God made each day was good, but this is **very good** (verse 31).

We'll discuss the seven days of creation as we reach the seventh day in Chapter 2, but how does this understanding of Genesis sit with you? Do you have questions?

### **Questions (Genesis 1)**

Since Scripture reveals God and defines our relationship with him, you might like to ask what light Genesis 1 sheds on these questions:

1. Who is God (in relation to creation)?<sup>8</sup>

.....  
.....

2. Who are we (in relation to God and creation)?<sup>9</sup>

.....  
.....

3. What do you make of Israel's claim that their God rules everyone and everything (Genesis 1–11)? Would that have been controversial? Is it controversial still?

.....  
.....

4. Theology often starts with "original sin," but Genesis begins with original "good." What difference would it make if we started with original good?<sup>10</sup>

.....  
.....

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/06/the-sovereign-structuring-his-realms-genesis-1/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/09/what-it-means-to-be-human-genesis-1/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://allenbrowne.blog/2022/12/01/original-good/>

## Genesis 2: Life in God's garden

In Genesis 1, God's work is set out in two parallel parts:

- In days 1–3, God established the spaces where his kingdom operates.
- In days 4–6, God filled those spaces with what belongs there.

Nahum Sarna (a Jewish commentator) describes it like this:<sup>11</sup>

<i>Day</i>	<i>Group I: The Resource Creative Act</i>	<i>Day</i>	<i>Group II: The Utilizer Creative Act</i>
1	Light	4	The luminaries
2	Sky, leaving terrestrial waters	5	Fish and fowl
3	Dry land Vegetation (lowest form of organic life)	6	Land creatures Humankind (highest form of organic life)

The seven-day week was already used in the Ancient Near East, but the notion of God resting on the seventh day was unique to Judaism. Sarna explains:

This seven-day typology is **widely attested** in the ancient world. As early as the twenty-second century B.C.E., King Gudea of Lagash, in southern Mesopotamia, dedicated a temple with a seven-day feast. The literatures of Mesopotamia and Ugarit are replete with examples of seven-day units of time. Most common is a state of affairs that lasts for six days with a climactic change taking place on the seventh. While the Creation narrative conforms to this literary convention, it is **unique** in that a different action occurs each day, with no activity at all on the seventh.<sup>12</sup>

The chapter break is unfortunate. Chapter 2:1-3 is part of the seven-day story:

### Genesis 2:1-3 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

<sup>2</sup> By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. <sup>3</sup> Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

For Israel, the seventh day was **holy**, meaning set aside, devoted. The Sabbath was devoted to rest, set aside from other days (Exodus 20:8-11). God never gave this law to the nations, so Christians are not required to keep Israel's laws (Acts 15:28-29). But Israel's laws still reveal something about God, so **what does the Sabbath reveal?**

God provides everything: a habitat for all his creatures, meaningful work, fruitfulness, food to eat (1:28-29). God's abundant provision means we do not need to work seven days a week. God is not a slavedriver—unlike Pharaoh who accused the people of being lazy if they wanted time off (Exodus 5:8, 17). But *rest* is not just for personal recovery; everyone rested together, so they could enjoy family and community, God's presence in his people.

<sup>11</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

So if you're driven to work seven days a week, you're probably serving a god named Dollar. Open your eyes to the Father who provides for all creatures. Instead of seeking to accumulate resources for the self, seek first his kingdom and his justice. You'll discover the Father who provides for us all (Matthew 6:24-33).

### ***The account of the heavens and the earth (2:4)***

To understanding the Bible well, we need to recognize where each account begins and ends. In Genesis, that's really easy. It tells us when a new story is starting:

#### **Genesis 2:4 (NIV)**

This is the **account** of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

The word *account* (*tô·lē·dôṭ* in Hebrew) means a family story, a record of a family's origin and the descendants who carry on the family line. Each major section of Genesis is introduced as a new family story (*tôlēdôṭ*):

Gen 2:4:	The account of the heavens and the earth
Gen 5:1:	The account of <b>Adam's</b> family line
Gen 6:9:	The account of <b>Noah</b> and his family
Gen 10:1, 32	The account of <b>Shem, Ham, and Japheth</b> (the nations)
Gen 11:10	The account of Shem's family line (the Semitic peoples)
Gen 11:27	The account of Terah's family line ( <b>Abraham's</b> father)
Gen 25:12-13	The account of Abraham's son <b>Ishmael</b>
Gen 25:19	The account of Abraham's son <b>Isaac</b>
Gen 36:1, 9	The account of the family line of <b>Esau</b>
Gen 37:2	The account of <b>Jacob's</b> family line.

That makes it very easy to see where each story starts and ends, but they're not a bunch of individual stories (a creation, a fall, a flood, ...). It's all one communal story, about families. Individuals matter in how they contribute to the family story.

It's Israel's story, of course, but other nations are acknowledged too. The nations come from Noah's sons (Shem, Ham and Japheth), as well as Ishmael and Esau. Those accounts are mentioned, but the main story is the origin of Israel.

The major sections of Genesis are therefore:

- A. Genesis 1–4      The heavens and the earth
- B. Genesis 5        Adam's family (through Seth)
- C. Genesis 6–11    Noah's family
- D. Genesis 12–25   Abraham (son of Terah) and Sarah
- E. Genesis 25–35   Isaac and Rebekah
- F. Genesis 37–50   Jacob (Israel) with his twelve sons (twelve tribes of Israel)

Genesis 2:4 introduces another important word too: the divine name. God (*Elō·hîm*) was the subject of almost every sentence in Genesis 1. Now we're introduced to **the LORD God** (*Yahweh Elō·hîm*). The word LORD in block letters is God's personal name.

This was the name that God revealed to his people in the Sinai covenant. As God told Moses, the name YHWH was unknown in the time of Genesis:

**Exodus 6:3 (ESV)**

“I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*], but by my name the LORD [*YHWH*] I did not make myself known to them.”

So if the Name isn't revealed until Exodus, why is it used 165 times in Genesis?

About 400 years ago, some German scholars decided that Genesis must be the writings of different authors stitched together. They called the guy who used the name *Yahweh* (or *Jehovah*) J. The guy who used *Elohim* (God) they called E. The guy who wrote Deuteronomy they called D. And then they imagined a priest pulling all these writings together after the exile, so they called him P. Academics then identified every piece of the Torah as from the pen of either J, E, D, or P.

But that whole attempt to reconstruct the Torah's origin is theoretical. Modern academics write documents. They failed to understand how stories were transmitted by communities in oral cultures. Their whole approach is now regarded as uncertain:

No new consensus has evolved to replace Wellhausen's basic theory ... There is now widespread recognition of the hypothetical character of the results of modern criticism.<sup>13</sup>

As C. S. Lewis pointed out, the method doesn't even work for modern writings:

What forearms me against all these Reconstructions is the fact that I have seen it all from the other end of the stick. I have watched reviewers reconstructing the genesis of my own books in just this way. ...

My impression is that in the whole of my experience not one of these guesses has on any one point been right; that the method shows a record of 100 percent failure.<sup>14</sup>

Genesis is not the work of a bunch of individual writers. It's a communal story, ancestral recollections passed down orally, written by the community at some point, and adapted over time so it remained their story. The adaptations are obvious in some places. For example, there are additions to Genesis 14 to explain how place names that have changed over time (verses 2, 3, 7, 8, 17). Genesis 10:10-11 explains the origin of Babylon and Assyria, Israel's arch enemies in later centuries. But that doesn't mean the whole of Genesis was written after the exile to Babylon. It's an ancient story, adapted so that it remained the story of Israel across many centuries.

It comes as no surprise, therefore that Israel would use the Sinai covenant name for God as they told the story of things that happened before that name was revealed.

Any thoughts or questions?

.....

<sup>13</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Inc., 1987), xxxv.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, C. S. "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," in *Christian Reflections* edited by Walter Hooper, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 159-160.

## ***The human in relation to God***

The story now shifts from God (*Elohim*)—the all-powerful sovereign over everything in heaven and on earth—to *YHWH Elohim*: God with a name, God in personal relationship with the human creature:

### **Genesis 2:7 (NIV)**

Then **the LORD God** formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

The Hebrew word for the human (or humankind) is *ā-dām*. Adam's name literally is Human. The human consists of the same stuff as the rest of creation, but we are living beings because God breathed his life into us.

Then God provides the human with a home, with everything we need to live well:

### **Genesis 2:8-14 (NIV)**

<sup>8</sup> Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. <sup>9</sup> The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup> A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. <sup>11</sup> The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold.

<sup>12</sup> (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.)

<sup>13</sup> The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. <sup>14</sup> The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

**Eden** was not the name of the garden; Eden was the region where the garden was. Eden was east of Israel (verse 8). A river flowed from the region of Eden to water the garden (verse 10). While we're not sure of the Pishon and Gihon rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates were the rivers of Babylon (Iraq today).

But this is no literal **river**. Rivers begin as streams that combine as they flow towards the sea, like the Murray and Darling Rivers in Australia, or the three headwaters of the Jordan to the north of Israel. This river does the opposite: it starts as a single river, dividing into four and spreading out to water the earth.

This is the river of life that flows from the source of life. God himself is the source.

The river spreading out in all four directions represents God's abundant provision for creation. Water is foundational for all life (flora and fauna). This imagery of the river of life keeps recurring throughout Scripture (Ezekiel 47; John 4:14; 7:37-38; Revelation 21:6, 22:1-2, 17).



Source: The Bible Project



The **tree of life** also symbolizes God's life. They had access to God's sustaining life until the day they disconnected from God and started to die (3:19-24).

God's provision is abundant: *all kinds of trees ... pleasing to the eye and good for food*. God entrusts them to partner with him in meaningful work, serving God by tending and protecting his fruitful creation, as gardeners and guards:

**Genesis 2:15-17 (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; <sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

Everything was theirs, with one exception: *the knowledge of good and evil*. God decides good and evil. The one thing we must not do is to take the one thing the Sovereign has reserved for himself. To disconnect from our life-source is to die.

When I define good and evil for myself, it ends up becoming "what's good for me." In all our power relationships (where one person has the power to decide), that's the problem.

***The human in relation to others***

So here's God's first instruction about what's good and what's *not good*:

**Genesis 2:18-20 (NIV)**

<sup>18</sup> The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

<sup>19</sup> Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

You might expect God to give the human some time to discover his identity, to figure himself out. That's how we understand life in our Western culture today. We think the goal of life is to be my best self. Subtly, we've made it all about **me**.

God says this isn't good. God intends us to find our identity not in isolation but in relationship. God is relational (1 John 4:8, 16), and we're in God's image. That's why isolation feels like torture. We're designed for relationship with God, with each other, with the creatures of creation.

The Creator presents the human with all the other creatures of creation. Naming them is the first step in finding the meaning of our life, for our vocation is to implement God's care for them (1:28).

The first thing the human learns is that the animals are social creatures too. They have partners. The lesson highlights his sense that something is wrong. The isolation of his individualism makes him acutely aware that this is *not good*.

Now the human is ready for God's final gift:

**Genesis 2:21-23 (NIV)**

<sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

<sup>23</sup> The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

God's creative drama blurred the line between "self" and "other":

- The partner is not another: *my bones ... my flesh*.
- The partner is another: a God-created identity with her own name.

Adam's response is to declare this paradox: "I recognize her as myself: my bones, my flesh. I recognize her as another person, with her own name, separate from me."

This shared identity (me, yet other) is the basis for the most intimate and enduring of human relationships:

**Genesis 2:24-25 (NIV)**

<sup>24</sup> That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. <sup>25</sup> Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Leaving their parents' households, the couple becomes a household for the next generation. *One flesh* is both sharing their bodies (sexual union) and sharing their lives as one intertwined being. Like Abraham and Sarah, they may move on from other friends and family, but they stick together as they share a life. People feel shame if their private parts are exposed to others, but as one flesh they feel no shame with each other.

Paul understands Genesis 2:24 to say that even casual sex creates a bond between people (1 Corinthians 6:16), so I guess it's understandable that many in our society feel their lives are fragmented. He also thinks the imagery of sharing a body as one flesh is a brilliant analogy for the holy relationship between Jesus and the church—the body through whom the Messiah restores his world (Ephesians 5:31).

Jesus treated Genesis 2:24 as the marriage ideal that God intended for us in the beginning (Matthew 19:5). Many things threaten that relationship in a world where people want to decide good and evil for themselves. The next chapter introduces the ultimate threat to our lives and relationships—death (3:19). Unfaithfulness also undermines the relationship by creating another bond with another person. So does divorce where one person is unwilling to keep sharing life. Abandonment can do that too. Marriage is God's gift of shared life, but it's fragile because we never have control of the other person.

The word *helper* in verse 18 does not imply Eve was inferior to Adam—unless you want to say God is inferior to us! In the Hebrew Scriptures, *helper* mostly refers to God (Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 29; Psalm 70:5; 121:1-2; 124:8; 146:5; Hosea 13:9).

We've already been told that God created both male and female with joint and equal authority over creation but not over each other (1:26-28). That equality continues in Genesis 2 in a relationship described as "one" in flesh and life.

### **Questions (Genesis 2)**

Do you have questions about Chapter 2?

.....  
.....

What does this chapter teach us about our human **identity**? What does it mean to be human? Where does that identity come from?

.....  
.....

What about **marriage**? Is it God's ideal for everyone? Can you think of any significant Bible characters who were single? What is marriage? Is it safe to commit to shared life with another person who is not under your control?

.....  
.....

What about the **Sabbath**? Is this God's ideal for everyone, or just for the nation established by the Sinai covenant?

.....  
.....

If God was in Eden, and God invited humans to live in his garden, should we understand Eden as a kind of **temple**, the place where God was present among people?<sup>15</sup> The temple was the centre of Jewish life in the Old Testament, so God's house among humans would be a beautiful way to describe creation,<sup>16</sup> a creation that's restored as a temple in the end (Revelation 21:22). What do you think?

.....  
.....

What else have you learned from Genesis 1–2?

.....

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/11/was-eden-gods-palace-genesis-2/>

<sup>16</sup> Greg Beale makes this case in *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

## So what?

The opening chapters of the Bible give us two perspectives of God's creation, two sides of the relationship between heaven and earth:

- Genesis 1 is from God's perspective. God is revealed as the heavenly sovereign whose decrees give shape, significance, fruitfulness, and order to creation.
- Genesis 2 is from our perspective. We wake up with God's life in our lungs, invited into relationship with God, recipients of his astoundingly rich provision, called to recognize his authority to decide good and evil, with authority over the other creatures and shared life with other humans.

In preparation for next week, please read **Genesis 3–4**.

## Going further

For more background, check out these videos from The Bible Project:

- [Genesis 1–11](#) (7:43)
- [The Tree of Life](#) (4:52)

or these articles from Allen's blog:

- [The kingdom story in Genesis 1–11](#), (as a [podcast](#)).
- [Why is the first book in the Bible called Genesis?](#)
- [Who is God?](#) (Genesis 1:1-19)
- [Who are we?](#) (Genesis 1:20-31)
- [Was Eden God's palace?](#) (Genesis 2:1-14)
- [What does it mean to be human?](#) (Genesis 2:15-25)

Recommended commentaries:

- John Goldingay. *Genesis for Everyone*. (2 volumes) Old Testament for Everyone. (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press; SPCK, 2010).
- Tremper Longman, III. *Genesis*. Story of God Bible Commentary. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).
- John H. Walton. *Genesis*. NIV Application Commentary. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).
- Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis*. (2 volumes) Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas: Word Inc., 1987).

**Tremper Longman** says:

The proclamation of Genesis 1 is that God, and no other, created the cosmos. This remarkable revelation is muted by those who insist that the main purpose of the book is to provide an alternative depiction of the process of creation as that offered by modern science. However, Genesis 1 (and we will see Genesis 2 as well) is not about how God created creation. It is not to be mined for hints about how long creation took or the specific way in which God brought the world and humanity into being. That said, the creation accounts provide profound

perspective on the nature of God, ourselves, and the world. Genesis 1 (and 2) imparts to its readers a worldview which affects the way they believe, think, and act. We will here concentrate on the contribution of the cosmic creation of Genesis 1, and in the next on the human-centered account in chapter 2.<sup>17</sup>

**John Walton** is great for hearing Genesis from the perspective of the culture that produced it rather than the cosmology of modern science. For example, he says:

The most important result of this study for the interpretation of Genesis is the realization that the Genesis account pertains to functional origins rather than material origins and that temple ideology underlies the Genesis cosmology. These conclusions have significant ramifications for the public discussions and controversies of our time, including those concerning the age of the earth, the relationship between Genesis and science, the interpretation of the biblical text in relation to evolution and Intelligent Design, and the shape of public science education.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, Walton says:

Genesis 1 is a simple but majestic account of God's bringing order to the cosmos. The literary balance between days 1–3 and days 4–6 results in highlighting day 7 as the climactic moment, when God takes up his residence and history begins under his exclusive sovereignty. Disdaining the myth-laden concepts of the ancient world and disregarding any attempt at scientific sophistication either ancient or modern, the text charts a course of theological affirmation that results in a picture of an ordered, purposeful cosmos with God at the helm, masterfully guiding its course. The cosmos functions just as it was designed to function—it was good. People are portrayed as the pinnacle of creation, endowed with dignity as those made in the image of the Creator. They are made in order to serve God, not as slaves but as partners, whom he delegates to do his work in the world. They enjoy his favor (blessing), and he provides what they need (food).<sup>19</sup>

**Nahum Sarna** (Jewish commentator) says:

Genesis is a book about origins: the origins of humankind, the origins of Israel, and the origins of the unique relationship between God and a particular people. ...

The God of Genesis is the wholly self-sufficient One, absolutely independent of nature, the supreme, unchallengeable Sovereign of the world, who is providentially involved in human affairs. He is, therefore, Lord of history. And the human being in Genesis—the pinnacle of Creation—is a creature of infinite preciousness who enjoys a unique relationship with God. Humankind is endowed with free will and, consequently, is also charged with moral responsibility and inescapable

<sup>17</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 38.

<sup>18</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 198–199.

<sup>19</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 65.

accountability. Moreover, the human race constitutes a single family whose ultimate destiny is determined by God Himself.

This universal opening serves as the background for the rest of the Book of Genesis and, indeed, for the remainder of the Bible. Following the perverse exercise of freedom of will that fractured the unity of the human family, God singled out from this divided humanity one people as His chosen instrument destined to fill a central role in the unfolding of His plan of history.<sup>20</sup>

**John Chrysostom** said this back in the fourth century:

Notice how the divine nature shines out of the very manner of creation, how he executes his creation in a way contrary to human procedures, first stretching out the heavens and then laying out the earth beneath, first the roof and then the foundation. Who has ever seen the like? Who has ever heard of it? No matter what human beings produce, this could never have happened—whereas when God decides, everything yields to his will and becomes possible. So don't pry too closely with human reasoning into the works of God; instead, let the works lead you to marvel at their maker. Scripture says, remember, "What the eye cannot see in him has come into view from the creation of the world and are understood through the things he has made."<sup>21</sup>

The New Testament quotes these verses from Genesis 1–2:

- Genesis 1:3    2 Corinthians 4:6
- Genesis 1:27    Matthew 19:4 || Mark 10:6
- Genesis 2:2    Hebrews 4:4
- Genesis 2:7    1 Corinthians 15:45
- Genesis 2:24    Matthew 19:5 || Mark 10:8; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31

---

<sup>20</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), xii.

<sup>21</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 74, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 35.