



Six Themes  
Everyone Should Know

# Genesis

W. Eugene March

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Press

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## ***Six Themes Everyone Should Know series***

*The Bible*, by Barry Ensign-George

*Genesis*, by W. Eugene March

*Matthew*, by James E. Davison

*Luke*, by John T. Carroll

*1 and 2 Timothy*, by Thomas G. Long

## Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

*Six Themes Everyone Should Know* consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

## Introduction to *Genesis*

Genesis is the first book of the Bible whose familiar words, “In the beginning . . .” (Genesis 1:1), present accounts of God’s creation. Genesis goes on to describe the beginnings of God’s relationship with the creation, including humanity. This begins the story of God’s work in the world and with people whose lives are related to God—in ways bad and good.

The book of Genesis is a rich narrative, full of memorable characters and events. The book, as the church’s Scripture, points us toward our beginnings as a human race as well as the beginnings of our faith in the God who is revealed in Genesis. This God cares and loves the creation and provides for the good of human creatures by being present with them.

In this study, we learn of God’s ways in the world. We find who God is in relation to those who look to God as a good and caring creator. Like those in Genesis, we find that the creator God is dependable and even vulnerable as God honors our human choices. God is with us. Yet the mystery of God’s presence can never be fully explained, only experienced. We, as people in Genesis also found, experience God’s directions in our lives—indirectly, but in truly real ways. We are tempted in many directions, to turn away from God or live life only as we want. But we can trust God’s providence, as God’s benevolent guidance. In faith, we find God’s good purposes for us. In our daily lives, we can live joyfully and with assurance that God guides and cares for us.

# Biblical Backgrounds to Genesis

## Name of the Book

“Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible. The name of the book is derived from Genesis 2:4a in the Greek translation: ‘This is the book of origins (*geneseōs*) of heaven and earth.’ The book is called Genesis in the Septuagint, whence the name came into the Vulgate [Latin translation] and eventually into modern usage. In the Jewish tradition, the first word of the book serves as its name, thus the book is called *bereshit* [in the beginning].”<sup>1</sup>

## Theological Themes

Genesis is “the narrative account of beginnings—of the world, of the community of Israel, of faith. It is a theological statement, claiming that all real beginnings are wrought by the purpose and speech of Yahweh, the God of Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

Genesis is concerned about relationships—between God and creation, between God and humankind, and between human beings. Genesis affirms that only one God is worthy of the name. Through covenants, God pledges divine love and faithfulness to the chosen people and calls them to promise their love to him.

## Structure

The book of Genesis can be divided into three parts:

1. History of the universe, showing God’s relation to it and introducing human history (1:1–2:3)
2. Human history before Abraham, showing God’s relation to humanity and introducing the history of God’s people (2:4–11:26)
3. History of Abraham’s and Sarah’s progeny to the descent into Egypt (11:17–50:26)<sup>3</sup>

1. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:933.

2. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), s.v. “Genesis,” 336.

3. Adapted from *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Henry Snyder Gehman (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 323.



*The created order is the work of a purposeful, good God, who throughout Genesis guides the creation toward a divine goal.*

## Chapter 1

# The Beginnings: God as Good and Caring Creator

### Scripture

**Genesis 1:26–2:3** God creates all, declares it good, and rests.

**Genesis 2:18–25** God creates humans to care for the garden.

### Prayer

Gracious and loving God, guide us as we reflect on the oneness of your world and the goodness with which you created it. Help us to recognize how we may and should communicate the wonder of your loving work to our world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

### Introduction

The book of Genesis opens the Bible by announcing the whole of creation and history to be the work of God. The beginning of all things is the basic topic of this book. In Hebrew, the Bible's first language, this book is called *bereshit*, "In the beginning. . ." In Greek, the name of the book is "Genesis," based on Hebrew *toledot*, usually translated as "generations" (2:4a).

Genesis is the result of a long history of tradition. The first two chapters preserve two different accounts of God's initial creative acts. The first emphasizes the initiative of God and the power of the divine word (1:1–2:4a). The second concentrates on the beautiful, bountiful setting God provided for man and woman (2:4b–25).

Together the two present a powerful description of the character of God—God is good—and the purpose of God—God is caring.

Several details signal the two different versions of God’s creative power. Certainly, the most obvious is in reference to God. In Genesis 1, God is referred to in Hebrew as *‘elohim*, a generic term for “deity” in all the Semitic languages. *‘Elohim* starts with nothing and eventually proceeds to the creation of humankind. In Genesis 2, God is referred to as *YHWH* (probably pronounced YAH-weh), a personal name. The exact pronunciation was lost over time as the name became too holy to be pronounced. The NRSV uses the term “LORD” (with small caps) when *YHWH* appears. The second version (2:4b–25) begins with *YHWH* creating a garden. To care for the garden, *YHWH* fashions first man from dirt and then a help-mate from his rib and charges them equally to care for the garden.

Genesis is a theological confession, not a scientific treatise. In antiquity (unlike now), everyone assumed that creation was the work of some deity or another. In Genesis, the Bible claims that there is but one Creator of all that is. The testimony of countless believers as well as our own experience of the created order leads us to acknowledge the correctness of this confession in Genesis.

### **A Basic Theme: Created by a Good God**

Many themes found in Genesis 1 and 2 could be explored. The two that will be underscored in this chapter are the goodness of God’s creative acts and the care that God shows toward the creation.

*The goodness of God.* The first account is arranged to describe six days of work and one day of rest. Repeatedly through the course of this presentation God steps back and declares the results “good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Then, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (1:31). From the light that God brought forth from a dark, formless void (1:2) to the human beings created in the divine image (1:26), all met divine approval.

The Hebrew term *tov* (“good”) can be used in a wide variety of ways. *Tov* can describe physical or spiritual beauty, order, ethical fitness, pleasure, something delightful, joy, something agreeable, and so forth. The term is quite positive. In itself, *tov* bestows great value to whatever it refers. The whole of the created order is good and thereby deserving of our scrutiny and appreciation (cf. 1:31).

A purposeful development occurs in this first account of God's creation. From the starkest beginning, bringing forth light, to the creation of humankind, divine purpose is at work. The creation is not haphazard. Each part of the order is blessed. Seasons are established. There are no goof-ups. Even the "great sea monsters" (1:21) are part of God's good work. The whole creative enterprise is aimed at providing for God, and for all, a beautiful, good setting in which to rejoice and rest (2:1-3).

*The caring character of God.* In the second account (Genesis 2), the emphasis is more on God's caring character. God's first creative act was to fashion a creature to till the as yet unmanaged earth (2:5-6). YHWH took dust from the ground ('*adamah*) and created a "man" ('*adam*). YHWH then placed "man" in a beautiful garden planted in Eden (2:7-8). With great caring, YHWH planted every good thing to bring pleasure to the "adam" (2:9-10).

Our caring God recognized that something was missing: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (2:18). So, a process was begun to find a partner for the man that finally led to the creation of a woman from the rib of the man (2:23). Thereby a "helper," a helpmate, was provided to the man. The two together, and equally, tilled and cared for God's garden (2:21-23). This beautiful account emphasizes the care of the Creator. God would not stop until humankind, along with God, was able to enjoy the good creation.

*God's representatives.* One more note needs to be sounded. When God created humankind—male and female—in the *divine image*, something quite remarkable was declared (1:27). The Hebrew term translated "image" usually refers to a physical representation of a king or a deity to whom deference was due. We humans are God's images, God's representatives, in God's world (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20-21).

## **The Life of Faith: Trust and Hope Are God's Gifts**

Faith in a caring, good God implies several important corollaries. First, and foremost in today's social climate, we are enabled to trust. Since all creation is the result of the power of a loving, caring God, trust is an appropriate response. Trust—another word for faith—cannot be manufactured or result from sheer human willpower. Trust is a gift of God.

The Bible throughout emphasizes that God enables people to live in trust. According to Genesis (as we will see in later chapters), God gave Abraham and Sarah sufficient faith to set out toward an unknown destination. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph display faith in following God. Later, Moses and the people trusted God and rebelled against Pharaoh and left Egypt for forty years of wandering through the wilderness. Daniel trusted in God even as he was cast into a lion's den.

Much later in the journey of God's people, Mary and Joseph trusted the word of God's angel regarding the son to be born to Mary. Jesus displayed faith as he approached his death. Paul repented of his persecution of Jesus' followers and became a missionary/apostle for Jesus' way. Countless other examples of such faith/trust can be found in the Bible.

As noted, faith is a gift of God, the work of God's Spirit. For all who recognize God as a good Creator, faith is readily available. But, though a gift, it can be exercised only by the one who receives it. God's people are given the opportunity to live in trust for we know who created the world and that the Creator is good and caring.

The second gift that comes with trust is hope. A good and caring God does not do things without purpose. Since God created the world and declared it "very good," it is reasonable to hope that what the good God desired will prevail. At times, such hope may seem foolish, but God continues to invite us to hope. Creation is the token of assurance.

Among other things, the certainty of constancy feeds hope. God's creation continually shows constancy with day following night, the seasons proceeding in regular order, even the "natural" laws of gravitation and so forth. Yes, there are occasions when this constancy is interrupted by earthquakes and other such disasters, but the world continues to spin and circle the sun in a regular orbit. Such constancy is critical for hope. But God offers more, in that hope enables people to overcome disappointment and loss. In the face of death, God-given hope offers the means to transcend the present and look toward recovery and renewal.

In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul preserved a cherished hymn of the community in praise of love. Love is above all to be practiced and honored (1 Corinthians 13:1–12). But there are two other gifts

as well that mark the “more excellent way” to be followed: faith and hope abide with love (12:31; 13:13).

## **The Church: Hope for the World**

At least three mandates arise from the conviction that a good and caring God created the world.

*The church has a clear message to declare.* There is but one world, and we are all part of it. This seems clear, but many people seem to think that they are exceptions to this reality. They act as though what they do has no effect on anyone or anything else. Pollution, disdain for the planet, abuse of natural resources, self-indulgence—all such behaviors must be challenged and altered wherever possible. Our one blue planet requires all of us to care and act.

*The church energetically joins in a massive educational venture.* Allies in the education of all to the threats and possibilities offered in the created order must be sought and found. The task is too big and too important to be guarded selfishly by one congregation, one denomination, or one faith community. An ecumenical, international coalition must be fashioned for the sake of the world. The church can foster such a coalition-building enterprise so long as its members can avoid caving in to nationalistic and denominational tendencies and fears.

Such work will not be easy. On the one hand, there needs to be concentration on local projects, namely activities that can engage local people—whether Christian or not—in working together toward the larger issues of justice and peace. At the same time, wherever possible, larger coalitions—regional, national, international—should be explored. Our primary incentive is the care of the one and only planet we all share.

*The gulf that many see between science and faith must be addressed.* The Bible is not and should never be confused with a scientific manual. Science is based on trial and error, on careful observation of the reaction and interaction of objects in controlled contexts. Ideas are explored with experimentation. Hypotheses that prove workable are kept and form the basis for the next step of exploration. Those that do not work are discarded.

The Bible is not such an accumulation of data. It is the record of the many reactions of people across centuries who have sought to

live faithfully by directives received from God that require interaction with God and neighbors. Many observations we know from our much later vantage point are inaccurate—the world is not flat! The Bible includes ethical instruction and prophetic admonition. All these words have a historical context to be understood in interpreting. The aim of the Bible is to offer a starting place for believers to reflect on the experience of others across the centuries that they thereby may better address the issues at hand. The dichotomy assumed by many as necessary between science and faith is finally destructive to all. The church must address this chasm and call for a positive embrace of science.

### **For Reflection and Action**

1. Obtain through the Internet or at your local library a picture or pictures of earth (the Blue Planet) as seen from satellites. Examine the picture(s) carefully, and prayerfully reflect on what it means that we have the privilege of inhabiting this beautiful globe. Plan a way to share this with others.
2. What do trust and hope mean in the way you conduct your daily life?
3. How can faith be shared in an honest and open manner in a society so skeptical of “religion”?
4. What one conflict or cause of depression in your social world is most pressing, and how can you begin to address it?



# Group Gatherings

Mark Hinds



# The Beginnings: God as Good and Caring Creator

### Main Idea

The created order is the work of a purposeful, good God, who throughout Genesis guides toward a divine goal.

### Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, “The Beginnings: God as Good and Caring Creator.”
- Review this plan for the group gathering, and select questions and activities that you will use.
- Obtain through the Internet or at your local library a picture or pictures of earth (the Blue Planet) as seen from satellites.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

### Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments for the next gathering.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming of all points of view; confidentiality; and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.
- Review the gathering format: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

### Opening Worship

#### Prayer (unison)

Gracious and loving God, guide us as we reflect on the oneness of your world and the goodness with which you created it. Help us

to recognize how we may and should communicate the wonder of your loving work to our world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

### **Prayerful, Reflective Reading**

- Read Genesis 2:18–25 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

*(spoken prayers may be offered)*

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

### **Conversation**

- Introduce chapter 1, “The Beginnings: God as Good and Caring Creator.” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review the Introduction (pp. 1–2). Share these key points:
  - a. God’s providence is the work of a purposeful, good God, who throughout Genesis guides toward a divine goal. The course of creation, from beginning to end, has direction and shape.
  - b. Trust (faith) in the constancy of our good God leads to hope amid our chaotic world.
  - c. To counter cynicism and the dismissal of science, the church needs to proclaim the positive message of a good and purposeful Creator.
- Review “A Basic Theme: Created by a Good God” (pp. 2–3). Discuss the implications of the three subthemes:
  - a. The goodness of God (p. 2);
  - b. The caring character of God (p. 3); and
  - c. God’s representatives (p. 3).

- Eugene March writes, “The whole of the created order is good and thereby deserving of our scrutiny and appreciation (cf. 1:31).” Ask:

*Do you disagree with anything in this statement? If so, what? Why? What biblical evidence do you cite to support your stance?*

*Do you agree that God wanted humankind to enjoy the good creation? What do you think the word “enjoy” means in this context?*

*What one conflict or cause of depression in your social world is most pressing, and how can you begin to address it?*

- Review “The Life of Faith: Trust and Hope Are God’s Gifts” (pp. 3–5). Ask:

*How do you respond when you hear that trust is another word for faith?*

*Try saying The Apostles’ Creed, replacing the word “believe” with “trust.” In what ways does that change the meaning of the creed for you?*

*How important is hope to you? Tell a story in which hope in God transformed your life.*

*How do trust and hope in God influence the way you conduct your daily life?*

- Review “The Church: Hope for the World” (pp. 5–6). Discuss the subthemes:
  - a. The church has a clear message to declare (p. 5);
  - b. The church energetically joins in a massive educational venture (p. 5); and
  - c. The gulf that many see between science and faith must be addressed (pp. 5–6).
- March writes, “Our one blue planet requires all of us to care and act.” Ask:

*Do you think that March's statement is compelling enough to mobilize Christians to act on behalf of the world? Why or why not?*

*What might those actions entail?*

*How can faith be shared in an honest and open manner in a society so skeptical of "religion"?*

*In what ways does faith complement science and vice versa? In what ways do you/can you embrace connections between faith and science?*

## **Conclusion**

Examine the picture(s) of the earth carefully, and prayerfully reflect on what it means that we have the privilege of inhabiting this beautiful globe. Discuss ways to share this with others.

## **Passing the Peace**

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

**Amen.**