



# Genesis

## Part One

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Genesis 1:1–25:18

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**Joan E. Cook**

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff




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in partnership with Liturgical Press*

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## DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK

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Dear Friends,

The Bible is a gift of God to the church, the people gathered around the world throughout the ages in the name of Christ. God uses this sacred writing to continue to speak to us in all times and places.

I encourage you to make it your own by dedicated prayer and study with others and on your own. Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock. It provides the tools you need to faithfully understand what you are reading, to appreciate its meaning for you and for our world, and to guide you in a way that will deepen your own ability to respond to God's call.

It is my hope that the Word of God will empower you as Christians to live a life worthy of your call as a child of God.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Anthony B. Taylor  
Bishop of Little Rock





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# Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

## **Genesis, Part One**

### **Genesis 1:1–25:18**

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into five lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.


If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet five times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

## **WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?**

The materials in this book include:

- The text of Genesis, chapters 1:1–25:18, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.



- Commentary by Joan E. Cook (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Genesis being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

[http://www.little-rock-catholic.org/lectures](#) Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

## HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

### Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–22) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 23–24.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 25 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.



## Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

*Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.*



# Genesis

## Part One

### LESSON ONE

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#### Introduction and Genesis 1–3

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Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

#### *Prayer*

*O God of creation, be with me in my study and reflection, and continue to create in me a hunger for your voice.*

Read the Introduction on pages 12–15 and the Bible text of Genesis 1–3 found in the outside columns of pages 16–22, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 23–24, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 25 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

## INTRODUCTION

Genesis is a story about beginnings: of the universe, of humans, of joys and sorrows, successes and failures. The book focuses on the relationships between God and people as well as those among different people. These themes are simple in principle, but often complex in our lives. While the themes of Genesis are universal they can be complex because they are expressed in the styles and settings of the ancient Near East. Before we look at the book itself, several introductory points will facilitate our reading of Genesis.

### **Themes**

Genesis introduces several themes that permeate the entire Bible. The first of these is divine causality; that is, the ancient people believed that the deities caused everything that happened in life. The ancient Israelites came to believe in only one God, whose name they eventually learned was Lord or “I AM” (Exod 3:14). They believed that the one God who caused everything to happen took a special interest in them. This divine-human relationship was understood as essential, and it applied not only to the relationship between God and the people, but also among people.

An implication of the importance of relationships is the setting of boundaries between God and creatures, including human beings, and between different creatures. The boundaries involved right relationships among all creatures and also between humans and God. In addition, boundaries factored into the topic of land and the possession of land. Finally, intimately connected to the theme of relationship is the theme of promise and blessing. The Creator promises to remember and care for all creation, and carries out that promise in spite of the many ways that creatures violate divinely set boundaries.

### **Ancient storytelling**

Another important topic is the way in which ancient people expressed their beliefs and values and told their story: it is quite different from

the way we today record our past. We strive to record information with great attention to the details of the event, such as when and where it took place, who was involved, what they did and said. Then we use these details in our efforts to interpret the event we record. But in the ancient world, the project of remembering the past took a different form. People were not as concerned with recording the precise details of an event as they were in probing its meaning. To that end they told stories.

This means of communication was ideally suited to nonliterate cultures, peoples who depended on oral communication because very few could read and write. The stories they told embodied the larger meanings they found in situations and events, and related them in ways their listeners would remember and pass down to their descendants. In fact, we will note throughout Genesis that some events were recounted more than once, with different points of focus and emphasis. The variations were included because each one added to the meaning of the event, and to the overall picture of the people’s relationship with one another and with their God.

### **Ancient Near Eastern parallels**

Several Genesis stories have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The best-known of these are the Mesopotamian creation myth called *Enuma Elish*, of which echoes can be seen in the Genesis creation stories, and a Mesopotamian myth about the quest for immortality called the Epic of Gilgamesh, of which traces are evident in the Genesis flood story. Other parts of Genesis include what appear to be allusions to ancient stories. The parallel stories provide plots and themes onto which the Genesis narratives superimposed the ancient Israelites’ beliefs. We will comment on *Enuma Elish* and the Epic of Gilgamesh in our discussion of the biblical creation and flood stories.

### **Documentary hypothesis**

As the ancient Near Eastern people continued to tell their stories throughout the genera-

## Preamble. The Creation of the World

### CHAPTER 1

#### *The Story of Creation*

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—<sup>2</sup>and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—

<sup>3</sup>Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light. <sup>4</sup>God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God

*continue*



## THE PRIMEVAL STORY

Genesis 1:1–11:28

The Primeval Story in Genesis 1–11 is the story of the earliest beginnings of the universe and of the human race. It talks of prehistoric times, naming a few places that we can identify today such as the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, but for the most part it recounts stories whose details we cannot identify with precision; often we can find parallel stories and themes in other ancient Near Eastern myths. The Primeval Story consists of two creation stories, followed by several examples of humans who missed the mark in their efforts to live up to the ideals of creation. The best known are the stories of Adam, Eve, and the serpent; the murder of Abel by his brother Cain; the Flood; and the tower of Babel. Each of these stories invites us to look at life's challenges and how we respond to them as individuals and communities.

The Primeval Story takes us back to that primordial time when God created the world. Today we struggle to weigh different theories of how the universe came into being; whether by divine fiat, by evolution, by intelligent design, or by some other means that we do not yet understand. Ancient peoples also struggled to understand how the world came into being. They expressed their questions and theories in stories, rather than in the scientific theories we

propose today. This difference is an important one to note when we read the Old Testament. Ancient peoples used stories to express their beliefs and values. These stories were not primarily concerned with relating the facts of a given situation; rather, they expressed the contemporary meaning their tellers found in ancient events and circumstances.

The first two chapters of Genesis tell two stories of how the world came into being. The two stories have several common elements: one Creator made the universe by shaping and organizing everything within the confines of time and space to make sure that every creature belonged in it and nothing was destroyed. Among all the creatures, humans were given a special place.

Each of the two stories has distinctive features as well. These give each story its unique character.

### 1:1–2:3 First creation story

Genesis 1:1–2:4a describes a seven-day process during which the Creator's word, "Let there be . . ." brings the different elements of the universe into being. The first three days witness the creation of the environment, and the second three days parallel the first, with the creation of creatures to live in the different spaces in the environment. We can chart this parallel in the following way:



Days 1-3	Days 4-6
Light, Day and Night	Greater Light, Lesser Light, Stars
Water and Sky	Fish and Birds
Land and Sea, Plants	Earth Creatures, Animal and Human

Creation begins with a powerful wind sweeping over the waters. Then the activity of each day begins with the formula, “God said: Let there be . . .” Then the narrative reports the specific activity for the day. At the end of the first, third, fourth, and sixth days, God saw that it was “good.” On the sixth day, after all the creatures had been created, God looked over all of creation and saw that it was “very good” (1:31). The description of each day’s work ends with the notation, “Evening came, and morning followed . . .,” then gives the number of the day. The account illustrates the power ancient people associated with the spoken word: to speak was to set an action in motion; thus speech had a sacramental quality insofar as it caused what it signified. The formulas suggest the unfolding of a ritual: creation occurs according to an organized plan by which God first creates the environment, then populates it with creatures suitable for that particular part of the universe.

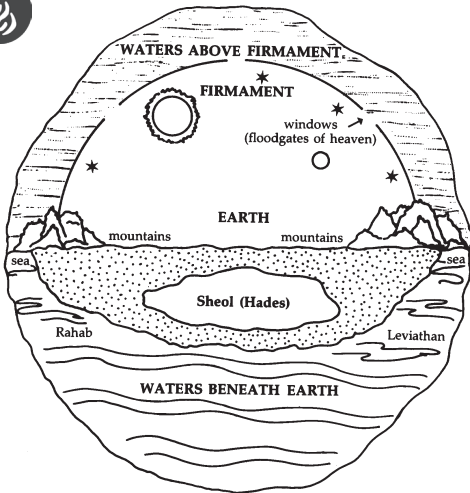


Illustration of ancient cosmology

called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day.

<sup>6</sup>Then God said: Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other. <sup>7</sup>God made the dome, and it separated the water below the dome from the water above the dome. And so it happened. <sup>8</sup>God called the dome “sky.” Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.

<sup>9</sup>Then God said: Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear. And so it happened: the water under the sky was gathered into its basin, and the dry land appeared. <sup>10</sup>God called the dry land “earth,” and the basin of water he called “sea.” God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup>Then God said: Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it. And so it happened: <sup>12</sup>the earth brought forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree that bears fruit with its seed in it. God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.

<sup>14</sup>Then God said: Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate day from night. Let

*continue*

In verse 6 the dome, or firmament, represents the ancient Near Eastern concept of a divider between the heavens and the earth. We can picture it as a large bowl inverted and set on a flat surface. Everything under the bowl is inside the firmament, and the rest is outside it.

One of the first acts of creation is to harness the waters by assigning them to specific places in the cosmos. This attention to water highlights its necessity for life, and the need to protect and preserve it in the arid ancient Near Eastern climate.

The separation of light from darkness in 1:14 makes it possible to count the passage of time, not only according to days but also to

them mark the seasons, the days and the years,<sup>15</sup> and serve as lights in the dome of the sky, to illuminate the earth. And so it happened: <sup>16</sup>God made the two great lights, the greater one to govern the day, and the lesser one to govern the night, and the stars. <sup>17</sup>God set them in the dome of the sky, to illuminate the earth, <sup>18</sup>to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup>Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup>Then God said: Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky. <sup>21</sup>God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of crawling living creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw that it was good, <sup>22</sup>and God blessed them, saying: Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth. <sup>23</sup>Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup>Then God said: Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: tame animals, crawling things, and every kind of wild animal. And so it happened: <sup>25</sup>God made every kind of wild animal, every kind of tame animal, and every kind of thing that crawls on the ground. God saw that it was good. <sup>26</sup>Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.

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

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. <sup>29</sup>God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; <sup>30</sup>and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the

*continue*

seasons and years. God blesses the creatures of the sea, air, and earth (v. 22), commanding them to be fertile and multiply, assuring the continuity of creation.

The Creator gives a special place to humanity in 1:26. Humans, male and female, are made in the image of God. This is a puzzling statement, for which several explanations have been suggested. For example, we were made with the ability to make decisions, just as God does; or we are the visible “image” of the invisible God in the world. As God’s human counterpart, we have the ability to communicate with God and to ask “Why?” when we do not understand. We also have dominion over all the other creatures. This awesome responsibility involves nurturing and protecting all the other creatures in the universe. The biblical story contrasts with the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, which is full of violence and oppression. In that version the gods compete for the opportunity to create the universe. The victor, Marduk, creates humans to serve the gods.

The seventh day is designated as holy because it is God’s day of rest (2:3). In the ancient world “holy” meant “set aside for God.” Legislation concerning sabbath observance relied on this model of divine rest. It gives us an example for how to spend the day of the week that is set aside for God.

This first creation account is the work of the P editor. At the time of its compilation the people of Jerusalem were in exile in Babylon as a result of the Babylonian takeover of the ancient Near East. They were searching for the meaning of their exile, and for evidence that God still cared for them and maintained the universe. The insertion of the account, one of the last to be composed, at the beginning of the entire Bible introduces the themes of one God, divine concern for creatures, the dignity of human beings, and the orderly division of creation into different habitats for different creatures, different times for different activities, and the importance of honoring God in difficult times as well as moments of celebration.



## 2:4-25 Second creation story

Immediately after the first story of creation, a second one follows. Like the first, it highlights the special place of humans in creation, relating it in a storytelling mode. We can picture the divine creative actions: shaping things out of clay, planting a garden, instructing the human on how to act in the garden. The breath of God suggests the same kind of energy found in the first creation story: the blowing wind is an invisible force that causes things to happen. God's first act of creation in this account is to shape a human being from the dust of the earth. Again we notice the importance of water: a stream waters all the ground, making it possible to work the soil, and becomes four rivers. Two of these rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, run through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

The prohibition in verse 17 not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil carries with it the threat of death. Death is not explained here; its meaning is already known by the time the story is set in writing, probably around 1000 B.C. The mention of it foreshadows the snake's temptation of the humans in the next chapter, where punishment by death is best explained as an etiological detail, which is an explanation of one of life's realities.

This creation story highlights the importance of relationships: God makes all the other creatures in an effort to provide a suitable companion for the human (v. 18). Only another human can offer that companionship, which finds its ultimate expression in marriage. The solemn wording of verse 24, "That is why . . ." identifies this verse as another etiology, or explanation of the reality of marriage.

This second creation story is the work of J, the storyteller who first collated the ancient stories in an effort to establish a common memory for the tribes united under David. It depicts the work of creation by giving concrete details and describing God in immanent terms. In other words, it depicts God with descriptions that enable us to know God's nearness to us. We can contrast this description with that in the first creation story, which depicts God as

earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened. <sup>31</sup>God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

## I. The Story of the Nations

### CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup>Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. <sup>2</sup>On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. <sup>3</sup>God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation.

### *The Garden of Eden*

<sup>4</sup>This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens— <sup>5</sup>there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground, <sup>6</sup>but a stream was welling up out of the earth and watering all the surface of the ground— <sup>7</sup>then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup>Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

*continue*

transcendent, or far beyond our ability to comprehend. The juxtaposition of the two stories illustrates the belief that God is both transcendent and immanent: infinitely beyond our ability to grasp and at the same time here in our midst.

<sup>10</sup>A river rises in Eden to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches.

<sup>11</sup>The name of the first is the Pishon; it is the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. <sup>12</sup>The gold of that land is good; bdellium and lapis lazuli are also there. <sup>13</sup>The name of the second river is the Gihon; it is the one that winds all through the land of Cush. <sup>14</sup>The name of the third river is the Tigris; it is the one that flows east of Asshur. The fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. <sup>16</sup>The LORD God gave the man this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden <sup>17</sup>except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die.

<sup>18</sup>The LORD God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. <sup>19</sup>So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name. <sup>20</sup>The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man.

<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, <sup>23</sup>the man said:

“This one, at last, is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
This one shall be called ‘woman,’  
for out of man this one has been taken.”

<sup>24</sup>That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

<sup>25</sup>The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.

*continue*

After the two creation stories, the Primeval Story describes incidents in which humans begin to violate the boundaries the Creator has established between God and creatures. Each of the stories describes the way the boundary is violated, gives a divine declaration of that violation and the tendency to evil, and reports divine actions to restore the balance in the relationship between God and humans. Interwoven with these are etiological tales about place names, customs, or human realities; for example, marriage, the wearing of clothes, the reality of shame, evil, and death. At different points throughout the stories, genealogies name those who belong to the different tribes and clans and specify the relationships among them. The names are often eponymous: names of individuals become the names of groups such as Israel, the name given to Jacob in 32:29.



The Hebrew verb **kabash (subdue)**

frequently appears in contexts of war (e.g., 2 Sam 8:11; 2 Chron 28:10) or in situations where one person has power over another (e.g., Esth 7:8). Here, human creatures are given power over other created beings, a power that Saint John Paul II interprets as responsibility (see *The Ecological Crisis*, 3). Far from a view that places humans at the center of creation with a right to dominate the rest of creation, the church is moving toward a recognition that all created reality has integrity and intrinsic value as the sphere of God's action. “Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness. Man [and woman] must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment” (CCC, 339).

## EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. What are your hopes and expectations as you begin studying Genesis?

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2. Identify some key events in your life that you would label as “beginnings.”

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3. List the three important themes of Genesis indicated by the commentary Introduction.

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4. What do we mean when we say that ancient writers were more concerned about meaning than details?

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5. How do the fourth, fifth, and sixth days of creation (1:14-31) complement the first, second, and third days of creation (1:3-13)?

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## Lesson One

6. When are you most keenly aware of the goodness of God's creation (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)? (See Pss 8:4-10; 19:1-4; 33:6; Jer 32:17; Rom 1:19-20.)

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7. What responsibilities are implied by the gift of our dominion over creation (1:26; 2:15)?

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8. How would you explain the importance of humans being created in the image of God (1:26-27)? (See 9:6; 1 John 4:20.)

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9. What changes in the human condition does Genesis 3:16-19 indicate are a result of the couple's disobedience?

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10. How is God's care and concern for humans shown to continue even after their sin (3:21)?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

### *Prayer*

*God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. (Gen 1:31)*

In your generosity, O God, you created all that is and looked upon it with love. Instill in us this same loving gaze as we look upon the created world. When we are tempted to take for granted any person or living thing, remind us of the goodness of each thing you created. We pray for those who need to be reminded of their goodness, especially . . .