

BEGINNINGS

Genesis

2

A God-created world . . . a God-formed people . . . two beginnings

SESSION PREPARATION

OVERVIEW

With an introduction to the Bible complete, it's time to dive into the story. Session 2 focuses on Genesis, the first chapter of the greatest story. Genesis is the first book of the section known as the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Genesis is filled with many great stories that set the stage for all that is to come.

Scenes in this Session

Creation! (Genesis 1–2)

Falling Up (Genesis 3–4)

Do Over! (Genesis 6–9)

A Promising Start (Genesis 12:1—25:18)

Family Feud (Genesis 25:19—36:43)

God's Dreamer (Genesis 37–50)

What's the Story?

The Bible begins at the beginnings. The dawn of creation when God's breath blew across the face of the darkness and spoke the universe into being. But that's not all the breathing God did. God breathed life, human life, into the dust of the newly formed earth and created people. That was the big beginning. But Genesis tells of a second beginning when God called and blessed a people, the family of Abram and Sarai. Why? So all the nations of the world might be blessed.

So, Genesis is really divided into two primary sections: Genesis 1–11 portrays the beginnings of the world, including creation, the fall into sin, and the flood and its aftermath. Genesis 12–50 tells the story of Israel's ancestors and is especially concerned to speak of God's promises to this family.

Take some time to review the following three items in *Lutheran Study Bible*: Old Testament Overview, Pentateuch, and Genesis Introduction (41-48). Highlight any items you may wish to share with your group.

STORY KEYS

- God created the world and people, and called them good.
- God continues to call us to care for the earth.
- God called and blessed a people, the family of Abraham and Sarah, so they might be a blessing to the world.
- God works for good through the lives of real people who are both faithful and flawed.

Because this course will focus on the story as it is told, questions of Genesis authorship and dating will not be emphasized. If such questions arise, you will want to address them, but don't dwell on these issues. Keep the focus on the story itself. The introductions for each of the books in *Lutheran Study Bible* address authorship and dating questions. Review these and refer to them with the group as needed.

Traditionally, Genesis and other books of the Pentateuch have been called the Books of Moses because Moses was the primary figure and suggested author. Moses does not appear in Genesis. Bible scholars today have a number of theories about who wrote Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch. It is most likely that the stories and laws and genealogies we have in the Pentateuch were written and compiled much later than the time of Moses.

What's the Message?

Genesis provides a framework for understanding the great story of God and God's people. But it does not start with the chosen people. Rather it starts with creation. God's purposes—at work among the people of Israel and in Jesus Christ—have to do with all of God's good creation. "For God so loved the world . . ." (John 3:16).

God created the world and people, and called them good. In God's world sin and evil did not exist. Tragically, human beings did not trust God, and sin disrupted the life of God's good world. Relationships between God and people, between people and people, and even between people and the created world fell apart. Sin and evil became powerful forces at work in the life of the world.

God did not abandon the world, but promised to continue to shower blessings at every turn. Genesis continues by describing God's strategy to save a world broken by sin and evil. God chose to bless the family of Abraham and Sarah, so that all the families of the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). God chose one family as a means to save all families. This exclusive move (choosing one family) had an inclusive goal: salvation of the entire creation, both human and nonhuman.

In his book *The Gates of the Forest*, author Elie Weisel makes the statement: "God created [people] because [God] loves stories." This is what makes the story begun in Genesis and continued throughout the Bible so amazing. God's strategy to save the world and its people includes us. God works through real people who are both flawed and faithful. We see this clearly in the stories of the first

family in Genesis. Abraham and Sarah and their descendants are not perfect. In fact, they are downright devious once in a while. But they display great faith as well.

God also continues to work though circumstances that appear to put God's strategy and God's promises at risk. Even though Joseph's brothers nearly killed him and thought they had gotten rid of him for good, God was at work in his life. And because God was with him, Joseph was able to help his family and the whole land of Egypt in its hour of need.

Focus on the Story Keys as you tell the story and help your group reflect on the meaning of the story in their lives. They are part of the story, and now that they have heard the beginning, they are in it for good!

PREPARE

1. Review chapter 2 in the participant book.
2. Review the Overview and Session Plan for session 2 in the leader guide.
3. Review *Lutheran Study Bible* introductions and articles recommended for session 2 preparation.
4. Watch the DVD segment for session 2.
5. Have extra *Lutheran Study Bibles* available for those who did not bring a Bible.
6. Have equipment for projecting or viewing the DVD set up and ready to go.
7. If you are having the class do the Creative Corner activity, gather any materials suggested.
8. Pray for your class members and for God's presence and guidance as you gather in God's Word.

LEADER PRAYER

Gracious God, creator of the universe, thank you for your story, and thank you for including us in it. Be present with me in my preparation and be present with each participant as we come together to hear the greatest story and reflect on what it means in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Extra *Lutheran Study Bibles* or other copies of the Bible
- Participant books
- Computer or DVD player; projector or TV monitor
- Course DVD
- Creative Corner materials (optional)
- Name tags
- Refreshments (optional)

CORE SESSION PLAN

The Core Session Plan is designed for use in one 60-minute period. The Core Session Plan can be extended 45-60 minutes by incorporating the group reflection time called Our Story, found at the end of the Core Session Plan. Suggestions for alternative settings and schedules are provided on page 13 of this guide.

GATHERING (10 MINUTES)

Welcome and check-in

Provide name tags again as you welcome participants to the session. If you are serving refreshments, have them set out ahead of time. Spend a few minutes asking if anyone wants to share any thoughts or insights from their personal “Mark it” reading for the week. You won’t be able to spend much time on this, but hearing a couple of testimonials will encourage more in the group to make this weekly reading and devotional reflection a part of their routine.

Scripture and prayer

Read the following verse and prayer, or ask a volunteer to do so.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

Dear God, we give thanks that you have created us and the world we live in. We humbly pray that you would continue to shower your blessings on the land and seas. Help us to be wise caretakers of creation. We thank you also for choosing the family of Abraham and Sarah to bring your blessings to the world. Thank you for blessing us through them, and give us faith to be your people of promise today. Amen.

See the storytelling tips on p. 10 of this guide.

TELLING THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

You or your designated storyteller should now turn to telling the portion of the story that is highlighted in session 2. Incorporate any or all of the Background File notes in the participant book (p. 23) as part of the telling. Use one of the following three options for telling the story, or devise your own.

1. Read through, summarize, and comment on the story as provided in the participant book.
2. Ask for volunteers to tell portions of the story.
3. Read the story script provided below.

At the end of the storytelling time, summarize the Story Keys for this session.

The Story Script for Session 2

In the beginning God created the world, the universe, and everything therein. What God created was VERY GOOD. Wind and sea, sky and earth, human beings and animals, plants and fish, planets and stars were all created with holy precision and intricacy working together to provide the cycles of life. This was the perfect gift of God to human creatures, whom God made in his own image with the responsibility to care for this creation and to live wisely within it.

However, it seems that having been made “in God’s image,” human beings were tempted by another creature, the serpent, into wanting to be like God. This first sin led to consequences both bad and good. These first human beings were sent out of the special garden that God had given them to tend.

But there was good news too. God, who gave them the sacred gift of creation also continued to care for them outside the garden. God gave them clothing and provided the tools for growing their own food and caring for the earth and its creatures. The perfection of the Creator’s gift remained while human beings learned how to live obediently as mortal creatures before the immortal and almighty Creator.

And what a learning experience it was. Murder, incest, and meddling with the “sons of God” made for a world God could no longer stomach. Still, the Creator could not give up on humanity. God drowned this world of sin in a great and mighty flood while saving Noah and his family. By raising this family up from the flood, all life could begin again. Along with the sign of the rainbow, God promised never to send a destroying flood again.

Generations upon generations of humans populated this fertile earth until God once again selected a special servant and his wife for a promising new chapter in the life of the world. God chose Abraham and Sarah in their old age to begin a family of blessing. God blessed them with generations upon generations of descendants carrying the blessing into the future.

By sheer miracle, at an age far past that for normal childbearing, Sarah and Abraham had a son named Isaac. And Isaac and his wife Rebekah had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob, though the younger son, tricked his older brother and his father into giving him the blessing and the birthright of the firstborn son. Jacob then received that blessing first given to Abraham and Sarah.

Each bearer of the blessing was confronted by many challenges. Abraham was called to the brink of sacrificing his one and only son. Isaac was deceived by his wife Rebekah and son Jacob into favoring his secondborn son over his firstborn. Jacob was tricked by his father-in-law into marrying both his daughters. He had to restore his broken relationship with his brother Esau, and ultimately had to wrestle all night long with an angel of the Lord who broke Jacob’s hip.

The Story Script for Session 2

Jacob was renamed Israel, and his descendants would eventually be part of tribes named after his twelve sons. Jacob's sons got into a feud with their youngest brother, Joseph, whom Jacob adored, and who made no bones about sharing his dreams of wielding authority over his highly jealous older brothers. They were so jealous that they faked Joseph's death while actually selling him to traders who took him to Egypt, where they sold Joseph as a slave to an official named Potiphar, who served the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Joseph's life in Egypt took a nasty turn when Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of trying to seduce her. Though he was innocent, the episode landed Joseph in prison. But prison brought good fortune to Joseph as he became known as a fine interpreter of dreams. Based on his reputation he was summoned to interpret a dream of the Pharaoh, which Joseph correctly interpreted as the coming cycle of seven years of fruitful plenty followed by seven years of devastating drought.

With the skill of interpreting dreams Joseph landed the job of overseeing Egypt's entire food storage program. He was highly successful in storing an abundance of food that would feed the people throughout the drought. This success brought his deceitful brothers from distant drought-stricken Canaan to Egypt and right smack into the presence of Joseph. Joseph eventually revealed himself to his brothers who then brought their father Jacob to live with them under Joseph's care.

After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers feared that he would retaliate for what they did to him many years earlier. Instead, Joseph told them how God worked through their bad behavior in order to bring a blessing to the whole family of Israel. God's promises continued alive and well through the lives of real human beings, both faithful and flawed.

PICTURING THE STORY (20 MINUTES)

Go through the reflection questions listed in this section in the participant book (p. 23). Then play the segment called Beginnings (session 2) on the course DVD. Encourage the participants to watch the story unfold as artist Joe Castillo depicts the scenes of the story. Participants may be invited to write down their own questions.

When the segment is done, address the questions together as a large group or ask the participants to discuss in smaller teams. Invite participants to share their own questions or observations. What difference did it make to see the story in this way?

SINGING AND PRAYING THE STORY (10 MINUTES)

Use one or both of the psalms provided in the participant book to help address the story and its themes. Psalms are best read aloud. You may have one volunteer read the entire psalm or portion of a psalm. Or you may wish to have the psalm read responsively, verse by verse or line by line. Use a solo reader with the group responding, or read responsively using different groups.

As time allows, discuss the observations and questions provided.

Psalm 8 (*LSB*, p. 856) is a psalm of creation. The psalmist is amazed by God's creation and wonders why God would care for human beings enough to give them a meaningful role within God's mission—to care for creation. God makes human beings the royalty of creation and gives them dominion over the works of God's hands. This dominion does not mean “dominate” creation in the sense of shaping it for our own selfish purposes. We can see the negative effects of that kind of dominion. Rather, we live in harmony with creation and use it wisely, so the gifts of creation can benefit all for today and future generations.

Psalm 32 (*LSB*, p. 880-881) is a prayer confessing sin and asking for forgiveness. It connects with both the story of the fall when sin entered the world and the story of the flood when God acted to give the earth and people a fresh start. Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), God sent Jesus to justify us (make us right in God's eyes) by grace as a gift. The law reminds us that we sin, just as Adam and Eve first sinned. We confess our sins and seek forgiveness, knowing that we need God's grace and mercy.

LOOKING AHEAD (5 MINUTES)

Mark it

Encourage participants to read and mark one or more of the passages listed in this section during the week ahead. Let the group know that at the start of next week's session you will ask volunteers to share any insights they have from this exercise.

You may find it helpful to take some notes or highlight items in *Lutheran Study Bible* readings to share next week as part of Telling the Story.

You are encouraged to do the “Mark it” exercise as well.

Next time

Point out the readings from *Lutheran Study Bible*. Encourage participants to review them. In the next session we will see and hear about God’s people on the move. To review this week’s story and to help prepare for the next session, you and your group are encouraged to read the following introductions from *Lutheran Study Bible*:

- Pentateuch, 45-46
- Exodus, 124-125
- Leviticus, 189-191
- Numbers, 237-238
- Deuteronomy, 302-303

OUR STORY

Ideas for optional settings and schedules for this time are provided in the introduction on page 13 of this leader guide.

WELCOME

Whether done consecutively along with the Core Session Plan or planned for a separate time or location, consider providing hospitality in the form of refreshments.

- Arrange the room comfortably for small group discussion.
- Introduce newcomers in the group.
- Begin with prayer, using the session prayer on p. 36 or another prayer of your choice. Ask volunteers to provide prayers, if they feel comfortable doing so.
- You may wish to begin by asking if anyone has a particular question or thought to share from the large group session. As an alternative to discussing those questions, simply note them or write them down on newsprint. Small groups may decide to discuss further.

CONVERSATION

See the tips for leading and participating in small group discussion on page 17 of this guide. Make copies of the reproducible Guidelines for Small Group Discussion available to all participants.

The reflection questions in the participant book are intended to help participants connect their own stories to the key themes of the greatest story. These questions can be used for personal reflection while reading or used to guide group discussion. It is unlikely a group could discuss all the questions in one discussion period. Don’t be concerned about this. Here are some options for approaching the questions:

1. As leader, you may choose to focus on certain questions from the list.
2. Ask participants to suggest questions to discuss.
3. Divide the groups into smaller teams, assigning the teams a designated

number of questions to discuss, and then have each group report back to the large group.

4. If you have a group that has the time and interest, you could assign each participant a question or two to think about and prepare a response during the week. These responses could be shared as discussion starters when the group meets for Our Story discussion time.

Questions and Responses

The questions below are designed with personal reflection and response in mind. They do not require a certain amount of prior knowledge in order to respond. Responses may vary according to individual insights and context. Even so, a few guiding thoughts are provided for some of the questions.

- *How do you see the stories of creation fitting with modern scientific theories about how the world was created?*

The key question about creation in Genesis is “Who created?” The key question about creation in modern scientific theories is “How?”

- *What’s the most amazing thing to you about the world we live in?*
- *What do you think it means that people were called to “keep” the earth (2:15)?*
- *Describe your understanding of the relationship between Creator and creation (including human beings).*

Genesis makes it clear that God is the creator and we are the created ones. Sometimes we forget our place. Sometimes we view creation and human beings as utterly fallen and evil. Only when this evil is gone will God’s vision of perfection return. But God’s creation is good, and that includes human beings. In spite of sin and evil, God’s creation has the capacity to bear great good and blessing.

- *Where do you see signs of the “upward fall” in the world? How can you stay “grounded” in your relationship with God? With others?*

The concept of “falling up,” of trying to be like God, may be a new way of describing sin for many. It is a useful image when thinking also about God’s purpose to redeem and bring salvation. We don’t have to try to climb the ladder of salvation up to God. God in Christ comes down to us and by grace saves us. Living in this promise grounds us. Our relationships are strengthened and grounded also by prayer, worship, and treating others with kindness and mercy.

- *What do you think of God’s “do-over”?*

Some may question how God could bring such a disaster on the world. Answering that question is not easy. God was clearly not pleased and exercised power as judge. God is a God of both law and gospel.

Questions and Responses (continued)

The gospel in the story is that God did save humanity and creation from total destruction and promised not to do this again.

- *What does God's commitment to all nonhuman creatures mean for us?*

We share God's commitment. It's part of the caring for creation theme begun in Genesis 1.

- *How do you think we are doing caring for the gift of the earth?*
- *What do you think it means to be "called" by God?*
- *What promises affect or shape your life?*
- *What do you think the phrase "Blessed to be a blessing" meant to Abram and Sarai and their family? What does it mean for you?*
- *Name the ways Abram's and Sarai's faith was tested. How would you define "faith"?*

Their faith was tested in many ways. They were asked to leave home and family and travel to a strange land. They were asked to have faith in the promise of many descendants, even though they had no children and were beyond the normal age of childbearing. They were challenged by their own actions, including Abram allowing the Egyptian pharaoh to bring Sarai into his household as a potential mistress. God tested Abram by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac.

- *Does it surprise you that God's promises got worked out through family members who feuded, tricked one another, and even lied to get what they wanted? Why or why not?*

Answers may vary. It is good news for us, because we know that God can work through us in spite of our weaknesses and faults.

- *God promised Jacob: "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go . . ." (28:15). How might this promise relate to your life?*
- *How would you describe the way God was at work in Joseph?*

Clearly God gave Joseph a unique gift of discernment. Joseph's relationship with God opened him to envisioning the present and the future in new ways.

- *How would you say God is at work in you?*
- *In what ways can bad circumstances be used for good? Have you ever experienced something like that?*

While we do not say that God causes bad things to happen, we acknowledge that God can work in the midst of these bad things.

Creative Corner

Depending on how your schedule is organized, you may wish to assign this activity for individuals or small groups.

How might you retell one or all of the “Beginnings” stories in Genesis in a creative way? You might consider drawing, sculpting, creating a photo gallery, silent movie video, scrapbook, cartoon, commercial ad, song, board game, contest, TV script, etc. Do this individually or work with one or more partners.

Provide colored markers, paper, construction paper, poster board, magazines, scissors, or other materials that may be used to complete this creative assignment.