



GENESIS to REVELATION

A Comprehensive Verse-by-Verse Exploration of the Bible

GENESIS

WALTER HARRELSON

LEADER GUIDE



GENESIS TO REVELATION SERIES

GENESIS Leader Guide

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And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (1:3).

1

CREATION

Genesis 1-3

DIMENSION ONE: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Answer these questions by reading Genesis 1

1. Who creates the heavens and the earth? (Genesis 1:1)

God creates the heavens and the earth.

2. What is the earth like when God begins creating? (Genesis 1:2)

The earth is formless and empty; darkness is over the surface of the deep.

3. What does God create on each of the first six days? (Genesis 1:3-27)

Day	What God creates on this day
One	light
Two	expanse
Three	dry land, vegetation

Day	What God creates on this day
Four	sun, moon, and stars
Five	living creatures of water and air
Six	animals and human beings

4. What does God command the first creatures to do? (Genesis 1:22)

God commands that they be fruitful and increase in number.

5. What position do the human beings occupy in creation? (Genesis 1:28)

They rule over all living creatures.

6. After God creates the human beings on the sixth day, what does God think of creation? (Genesis 1:31)

God sees everything that he has made, and it is very good.

Answer these questions by reading Genesis 2

7. What does God do to the seventh day? Why? (Genesis 2:3)

God blesses it and makes it holy, because on this day he rests from all his work of creation.

8. From what does God make the first man? How does God give the man life? (Genesis 2:7)

God makes man from the dust of the ground and breathes into man's nostrils the breath of life.

9. Where does God put the man? (Genesis 2:8)

God puts the man in the garden God plants for him.

10. What command does God give the man when he places him in the garden? What will happen if the man disobeys the command? (Genesis 2:16-17)

The man must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If the man does, he will die.

11. When God decides that it is not good for the man to be alone, what does God do first? (Genesis 2:18-19)

God forms animals and birds from the ground and brings them to the man to see what he will call them.

12. From what does God make the first woman? (Genesis 2:21-22)

God makes the woman from a rib taken from the man's body.

13. According to God's instructions, what takes place when a man and woman unite? (Genesis 2:24)

The man leaves his parents and is united with his wife. They become one flesh.

Answer these questions by reading Genesis 3

14. What does the serpent tempt the woman to do? (Genesis 3:1-5)

The serpent tempts the woman to eat some of the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden.

15. What knowledge comes to the man and the woman when they eat the fruit? (Genesis 3:7)

They know they are naked.

16. When they hear the sound of God in the garden, what do they do? (Genesis 3:8)

They hide among the trees.

17. Whom does God question first? (Genesis 3:9)

God first questions the man.

18. What does God do to the serpent who tempted the woman? (Genesis 3:14)

God curses the serpent and makes it crawl on its belly.

19. What is the woman's punishment? (Genesis 3:16)

She will experience much pain in childbearing.

20. What is the man's punishment? (Genesis 3:17-19)

He will toil hard to make a living from the earth.

21. What does God make for the man and the woman before sending them out of the garden? (Genesis 3:21)

He makes them garments of skins.

DIMENSION TWO: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE MEAN?

Background Information on Genesis 1–3

As the participant book suggests, many scholars think that Genesis 1–3 originated from distinct strands of tradition. These strands of tradition were then brought together by different individuals or groups in ancient Israel. Notice that the author of Luke's Gospel speaks of a similar process in Luke 1:1-4. He gathered together all of the available traditions about Jesus, weighed them, and put them together in a faithful way.

So also, ancient Israel had various ways of understanding the Creation. It seems likely that the people came to prefer two of these ways. The first tells the story in a straightforward, orderly way. It is based on the Hebrew view of the structure of the universe. It helped people understand that God was in charge of the whole process and carried it through in six days. Every act of God was good and complete. This story would have been of special value to the teachers of ancient Israel, the priests and theologians. Genesis 1 begins this story, which continues through Genesis 2:3.

The other tradition is a beautiful and sensitive literary account of the first man and woman. It tells of God's loving care for the first human beings, of their temptation and sin, and of God's leading them out into the kind of world that we know, outside the garden of Eden.

The stories fit together very well and complement each other. Indeed, they fit together so well that we cannot be certain that two accounts really exist. Perhaps we have a single account that presents the Creation in two ways. But most scholars today believe that at least two traditions lie behind the Genesis 1–3 account.

Genesis 1:16. The participant book points out that the creation of light on the first day (Genesis 1:3)—before the sun, moon, and stars—was not a slip by the writer. The Israelites knew that the sun gave the basic light for earth. But they wanted their hearers and readers to know that God was not dependent upon the sun for light. Rather, the sun depended on God for its existence and power. Every creature in all the world was created by God and was good. While the sun was considered to be one of the high gods for the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians, it held no power over Israel's God.

Genesis 1:26-28. This story of the Creation identifies the human race as consisting of male and female. When the writer says “man” he means “humankind,” not the first male human being or only male human beings.

God prepares to create the first human beings, made in his own image. Yet before he does so, he reflects on the action as the heavenly host listen in. Most interpreters say that this poetic vision of God in heaven shows just how decisive a matter this act of creation is.

To be made in God’s image and likeness says much about God as well as about human beings. In all of Creation, no other creatures are in God’s image. We understand God to be a thinking, feeling, and willing being, just as we are. Since human beings are in the image of God, we share the divine likeness. For ancient Israel, being created in God’s image meant that men and women were able to have communion with God, to share in God’s purposes, to follow God’s path.

Genesis 2:21-24. In the story of the first man and woman, God creates the man first. God charges the man to care for the garden. But Genesis 2, like Genesis 1, also knows that humankind consists of male and female persons, each helping to complete the existence of the other.

It is regrettable, therefore, that persons have used the Creation story throughout the centuries to show the superiority of men over women. Many have pointed out that God created the woman from the rib of the man, and that the man in ancient Israel was certainly understood to be superior in position and worth to the woman. In most ancient societies the woman occupied a position second to that of the man. Our story, not surprisingly, shows some of this understanding. But our story also gives a clear picture of the equality of male and female in God’s sight.

Genesis 3:1. The serpent that speaks with the woman is a beast of the field, which God made. He walks, so to speak, and he talks. He is not a demon. He is sly and cunning, and he likes to deceive. Throughout much of the ancient Near East, the serpent was a symbol of both deity and fertility. The headdress of the Egyptian pharaohs was crowned with the head of a cobra. The serpent plays a major part in many other stories, legends, and traditions from the ancient Near East. Many persons think of this creature as a kind of demonic being. Our story does not depict the serpent as a representative of Satan, but as one among God’s many creatures.

Genesis 3:7. This verse shows that the man and the woman lived in the garden unclothed and knew no sense of shame at all—until they disobeyed the will of God. And the shame they discover is not so much their nakedness as their disobedience to God. The old communion between them and God is broken, and the clothing helps to hide them from God.

Genesis 3:9. God addresses the man first, since men were considered the leaders of the household. As noted in the participant book, however, the story makes it clear that the man was present with the woman when she was tempted. He shared the temptation, but the serpent chose to tempt the woman.

In ancient Near Eastern society, the man was understood to have special responsibilities as head of the household. How, we might ask, could the man have let the conversation between the serpent and the woman go on in the way it did? Why didn’t he stop the temptation? Clearly, this story shows that the man and woman share responsibility for sin.

Genesis 3:14-19. The curse that God places upon the serpent and the punishment that falls upon the man and woman are explanatory statements. These verses explain how it happens that human beings must toil so hard for the food they secure from the earth and that women must endure pain in childbearing. In the case of the serpent, the story explains why this creature slithers along on its belly, why it eats dust, and why there is such hostility between snakes and human beings.

DIMENSION THREE: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE MEAN TO ME?

The class discussion of Dimension Three will concentrate on some or all of these areas: “The Bible and Science,” “Personal Relationship With God,” and “Original Sin.”

Genesis 1:1–2:3—The Bible and Science

According to the participant book, two attitudes prevail about the relationship between the Creation narratives and scientific theory. Many persons believe that the Creation accounts are not scientific at all, but are religious. Others believe that the biblical description of Creation opposes modern scientific theory. As the participant book states, neither belief is quite correct.

Science tries to better understand the world and its operations. Creation stories can never be scientific in the full sense of the word, because we cannot prove them to be true or false. Creation stories are faith-claims. Ask the class members whether they have had problems reconciling the biblical account of Creation with scientific theories. Then ask them to talk about ways in which they have tried to resolve this conflict.

You might ask the class members why they think the Creation stories in Genesis were written. Creation stories all attempt to answer the question of how Creation could have happened at all. Was there not something there from which the world was formed initially? How do you create something from nothing? Creation seems to presuppose a prior substance, a prior space, a prior time.

The Creation account in Genesis does not resolve this problem. We read that God called into being everything that exists. But the story goes on to say that the initial form of the Creation was chaotic, unordered stuff that God ordered meaningfully. God surely must have called time into being, but Creation began at the very moment when God’s action as Creator began.

The participant book asks the class members to reflect on the statement, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” God calls the world he has made “good,” and that says something about the nature of the created world. This affirmation opposes the widely held view in ancient cultures that the created world is only a shadow of the “real” and essentially good world of the gods. Genesis 1 tells us that our world, although marred by human sin, is good. We are to maintain God’s good creation.

Genesis 1 affirms that God’s creatures are created good. Each person is a creature of God. Therefore each person, each child of God, is good—sinful, yes, but not evil. God’s creation is good.

Genesis 2:4-17—Personal Relationship With God

The participant book talks about the differences between the two biblical accounts of Creation—one in Genesis 1 and one in Genesis 2. Although each of the stories emphasizes a different aspect of God’s creation of the world, both stories concentrate on God’s relationship with humankind.

The previous issue centered on the fact that God calls his creation “good.” Ask the class members to read Genesis 2:4-17 again and discuss what new insights this passage offers us about our relationship to God. You might want to concentrate on two main areas in this discussion.

First, in Genesis 2:4-17, God creates the man before anything else. Unlike the account in Genesis 1, where the man and woman are the last to be created, here the man is the first of God’s creatures. The remainder of Genesis 2 portrays the man as God’s helper in the creation process.

Second, our narrative points out that God charges the man with responsibility for the rest of the created world (Genesis 2:15). The responsibility God gave to the first man tells us that all persons are responsible for the stewardship of God’s world. While the world is for the use of human beings, it is not ours to exploit in any way we see fit. The class may draw other insights from this passage.

Genesis 3—Original Sin

The participant book asks the question, “What is the sin of the woman and the man?” Some persons call this basic sin *disobedience*. The man and the woman disobeyed God’s command. Augustine, one of the early saints of the church, called the sin in Eden *pride*. Ask the class to reflect on whether pride is involved in this story. Why is eating the fruit of the tree an act of pride? How do human beings transmit sin? As the participant book indicates, Genesis 3 insists that sin arises both in the world outside human beings and within every human being. We freely choose to depart from the path that God lays out for us. A world already marred by sin encourages us to do so. The origin of sin is mysterious.

Ask your group if the term *sin* is always a religious term—a term that refers to a break in the relationship of human beings with God. We read of crimes against the state and against fellow citizens. We may deplore certain moral failings in ourselves and in others. But many persons think that sin is always sin against God. Do you think this statement is true? Why or why not?

To prepare for this discussion on sin, you might want to look up “sin” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon, 1962). This book gives the range of meanings for the word *sin*. Or have someone in the class do this exercise during the class time.

The participant book asks the class members to think about their interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve. You might ask the group if Genesis 3 ends with a sense of despair or with a deep sadness. If the latter, why is that? Is it because the story of the man and the woman’s leaving the garden is a story as much marked by God’s love and grace as it is by God’s judgment? The mixture of divine grace and divine punishment that runs through these chapters appears often in the later stories in Genesis.

God clothes the first human pair as they go out to greet the world. God reaffirms his care in that the man may work, find food, earn a livelihood—although with great toil. God confirms the vocation of women as wives and mothers, but he also recognizes that women have great initiative and power of independent action. They suffer during childbearing, but they are indispensable in the peopling of God's entire creation.

And most important of all, God does not remain within the garden. God accompanies the first human pair as they leave, and the garden of Eden no longer figures in the story of humankind at all. The world awaits.

At the close of the session, ask the class members to think about what insights they have gained from studying this lesson on Genesis 1–3. What have they learned about sin? about their relationship to God and to others? about the Bible and scientific theory? You may want to list these insights on a markerboard or a large sheet of paper.



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GENESIS

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Dr. Walter Harrelson served as Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee, and adjunct professor in the Divinity School of Wake Forest University in Winston Salem, North Carolina. He wrote several books and many articles on the Old Testament, as well as on religion and worship in Bible lands.

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