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A NavPress Bible study on the book of

GENESIS

NAVPRESS 

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Each guide in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies covers one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the individual books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book;
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides;
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible;
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole;
5. To teach you how to let God’s Word transform you into Christ’s image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give

obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

(Note: In some lessons you are given the option of outlining the passage just studied. Although the outline is optional, you will probably find it worthwhile.)

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and Details

The guide begins with an overview of the book. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson one you will lay the foundation for your study by asking yourself, *Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?*

Then, in lesson two, you will begin analyzing successive passages in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

Finally, in the last lesson, you will review the whole book, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of Questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: *What does the passage say?* Then you interpret: *What does the passage mean?* Lastly you apply: *How does this truth affect my life?*

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clearcut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise of knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do you want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies

your thinking and helps you to remember.

Meditating on verses is an option in several lessons. Its purpose is to let biblical truth sink into your inner convictions so that you will increasingly be able to act on this truth as a natural way of life. You may want to find a quiet place to spend five minutes each day repeating the verse(s) to yourself. Think about what each word, phrase, and sentence means to you. At intervals throughout the rest of the day, remind yourself of the verse(s).

Study Aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 211. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as The Living Bible is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and Meditating

A Psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you, and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen’s studies.

Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (pre-formed shower wallboard works well), so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 213-214 list some good sources of counsel for leading group studies. The *Small Group Letter*, published by NavPress, is unique, offering insights from experienced leaders every other month.

LESSON ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Beginnings

"In the beginning . . ."
Genesis 1:1

Genesis means "origin," "beginning," and the book of *Genesis* is about beginnings. In it, God lays the groundwork for the rest of Scripture, His revelation of Himself to man.

Genesis begins with God's creation of the world and its most blessed occupants, the human male and female. From this climax, the story follows man's plunge into rebellion and its consequences—shame, death, murder, rootlessness, tyranny, idolatry, and war. Two low points mark this account of primeval history (chapters 1-11): the Flood that wipes out an unsalvageable generation, and the scattering of the nations who try to build the Tower of Babel. Each time, man seems bound for irredeemable corruption, yet God prevents disaster with merciful judgment.

After Babel, the story narrows to follow one family—Abraham's—through four generations (chapters 12-50). Through this family, God plans to offer salvation from the consequences of the Fall to the whole human race. God calls Abraham from Mesopotamia to Canaan and promises that his descendants will own that land. In the twists of life, God teaches Abraham, his son, his grandson, and his great-grandsons to trust their Lord's promises and obey His plans. By the close of *Genesis*, God has led seventy members of the chosen family into Egypt but has trained them to pin their hopes on a return to Canaan four hundred years in the future. The stage is set for God's greater acts of salvation and self-revelation in the *Exodus*, which itself will be only a shadow of mightier things to come. *Genesis* constantly reminds us that it is only the beginning of a story that will climax in the New Testament and not end until the vision of Revelation is accomplished.

On the next page is a brief outline showing the four main events of primeval history and the four generations of Abraham's family.¹

- I. Primeval History (chapters 1-11)
 - A. Creation
 - B. Fall
 - C. Flood
 - D. Babel
- II. Patriarchal History (chapters 12-50)
 - A. Abraham
 - B. Isaac
 - C. Jacob
 - D. Joseph

Genesis and the New Testament

The New Testament quotes Genesis more than any other Old Testament book except Psalms and Isaiah. The great themes of the New Testament all begin in Genesis, and many are scarcely mentioned again between Exodus and Malachi.

For instance, the garden of Genesis 2 with its river and tree of life return in Revelation, where the serpent of Genesis 3 and the Babylon built in Genesis 10-11 finally fall. A series of prophecies from Genesis 3:15 through 49:10 point toward the Christ, who transforms the consequences of Adam's sin. The New Testament God—the One personal, perfect, just, merciful, all-powerful Creator and Savior—is the God of Genesis. Likewise, the New Testament view of man's high origin and mission, and his fall and predicament, are rooted in Genesis. Grace, election, free will, the covenant relationship, the substituted sacrifice that atones for sin, the transformation of the sinner, and the obedience of faith all figure in Genesis.

Focus on redemption

Genesis doesn't tell us everything we might like to know about the history of the universe and humankind, for much of that history lies outside God's purpose in giving us the book. Genesis focuses on God's acts as they bear on His plan to redeem man from sin. The book first explains God's perfect plan for humans and then begins to trace His response to their sin—the plan of salvation through a descendant of a chosen family. The origin of the universe is relevant only in that it reveals God's character and defines man's original nature. The non-chosen branches of the human race are not unimportant to God, but they stand outside the redemption story until in Christ they ultimately receive salvation through the chosen family.

Genesis and the Old Testament

Genesis is one of the five books of Moses (see Nehemiah 8:1, John 5:46, Luke 24:27), which the Jews called the *Torah* (Teaching, Law, Instruction—Psalm

119:174, Jeremiah 31:33). The English word *Law* does not quite describe the history and instruction about God that the Torah contains. God does give rules for living, but only after He has shown His love and power by delivering Israel (the descendants of Abraham through his grandson, Jacob-Israel) from slavery in Egypt.

The Torah tells how God made a *covenant* (a treaty between a lord and his subjects) with Israel. The rest of the Old Testament recounts Israel's repeated failures to live up to God's requirements and the repeated sufferings that rebellion causes. Over and over God allows His people to suffer and learn, but He protects a remnant of the chosen family, sends prophets to warn and teach His people, and assures them that one day the promised descendant of Abraham will come. Thus, the rest of the Old Testament tells how God continues the chosen family's training, the story begun in Genesis. It takes roughly two thousand years to prepare Abraham's family to give birth to the Savior, Jesus.

Viewing the Old Testament as the story of how God shaped Israel to receive the Savior, we can see how Genesis fits into this framework:

1. The five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) recount Israelite history from the people's beginnings until Moses' death, when the Israelites are poised on the border of the promised land (?-1400 BC). The books also give laws for living in the land under Israel's king, the Lord.
2. Nine books (Joshua-2 Chronicles) tell Israel's history from the start of the conquest of the land, through the climax of prosperity under David and Solomon, and finally to degeneration, conquest by enemies, and exile (about 1400-586 BC).
3. Three books (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther) record history after the exile (about 538-420 BC).
4. Five books (Job-Song of Songs) give us poetry and wisdom from Israel's golden years under David and Solomon through the exile (about 1000-450 BC).
5. Seventeen books (Isaiah-Malachi) record the words of prophets from some centuries before to shortly after the exile (about 855-430 BC).

Genesis, then, is the beginning of the story. It ends with Jacob's family settled in Egypt around 1876 BC. About 430 years later, Moses led the descendants of that family out of Egypt and back to the land promised to Abraham. During the forty-year trek from Egypt to Canaan, Moses wrote Genesis and his other books. (For relative dates, see the timeline on page 16.)

Before the band of fugitive slaves entered the promised land, every one of them needed to know some core truths about their God and themselves. They had to know how being Israelites made them unique, set apart from all the peoples they were going to encounter. They needed to know who this God was who had freed them from Egypt and promised them Canaan. The

stories about the Creation, the Flood, Babel, Abraham, and so on may have been passed down in Jacob's family for generations, but the people needed an accurate, written record stamped with God's authority. In Canaan, they were going to face all kinds of challenges to their calling as a holy people and to their faith in the true God, so God guided Moses to write five books to set Israel straight.

As you study Genesis, think of yourself both as a Christian and as an Israelite whose family has just entered Canaan. Keep in mind these questions: "Who is this God we've committed ourselves to? What is my relationship to Him, and how did it come about? How did our people, Israel, come to be? What did God choose us to do, and why? Where did we come from, and why are we trying to conquer Canaan?" And most importantly, "How should all this affect the way I live?"

The documentary theory

A theory current among many scholars asserts that the Torah is not the work of Moses, but rather is an edited compilation of "four types of documents, processes, or schools."² These four are called J (the Jahwist or Jehovah source), E (the Elohist or Elohim source), P (a Priestly school), and D (the Deuteronomist or Deuteronomic school who did the final editing). There are many variations of this theory, and also many flaws. Therefore, we will leave this debate to the commentaries³ and follow the traditional view that Moses substantially wrote Genesis. He may have used oral and written records of tribal genealogies and history, since in societies where writing is rare, people cultivate extremely accurate memories for such things. A later editor may have updated certain place names for clarity; for instance, Dan (Genesis 14:14) was not given this name until the days of the Judges (Judges 18:29).⁴ However, these details do not negate the fact that Genesis was written by Moses under the guidance of God's Spirit.

Science and Scripture

Genesis focuses on man's relationship to God and draws its information from revelation and remembered events. Science studies material remains (fossils, rocks, the stars, etc.) and repeatable experiments to answer questions about how and when things happened. Therefore, it is not surprising that science can tell us nothing about God, and that Scripture does not address technical questions of physics, chemistry, and biology. As God's Word, the Bible is infallible, but our human understanding of both God's Word and material remains is very fallible. Therefore, in this study we won't tackle alleged conflicts between traditional interpretations of Scripture and current interpretations of material remains. Instead, we will deal with the issues Genesis intends to address and ignore most others. We assume that perfect understanding of Scripture and material evidence would resolve all apparent conflicts, but these matters are unsuitable for a Bible study guide.⁵

The "Generations" of Genesis

Genesis takes its name from the Greek translation of a word that occurs ten times in the book. Most scholars now believe that the phrase, "these are the generations of . . ." (NASB, KJV, RSV) or "this is the account of . . ." (NIV) refers to the descendants of the person named and to the account that follows the statement. The ten statements structure Genesis like a family tree, as follows:⁶

Prologue (1:1-2:3)

1:1-13 Creation's kingdoms

1:14-31 Creature-kings

2:1-3 Creator King

The generations of heaven and earth (2:4-4:26)

2:5-25 Man's original blessedness

3:1-24 Entrance of sin

4:1-26 Man in exile

The generations of Adam (5:1-6:8)

5:3-32 Covenant genealogy: Adam to Noah

6:1-8 Wickedness of man

The generations of Noah (6:9-9:29)

6:9-8:19 Covenant of the flood

8:20-9:17 Covenant after the flood

9:18-27 Covenant in prophecy

The generations of the sons of Noah (10:1-11:9)

10:1-32 Origins of the nations

11:1-9 Sin and dispersion from Babel

The generations of Shem (11:10-26)

The generations of Terah (11:27-25:11)

11:27-15:21 Abraham inherits the covenant

16:1-22:19 Abraham's heir: through Hagar or Sarah?

22:20-25:11 The succession prepared

The generations of Ishmael (25:12-18)

The generations of Isaac (25:19-35:29)

25:19-28:9 Isaac inherits and has an heir

28:10-35:29 Jacob sojourns in Haran and returns

The generations of Esau (36:1-37:1)

The generations of Jacob (37:2-50:26)

37:2-45:28 Jacob's heirs

46:1-47:27 Israel's descent into Egypt

47:28-50:26 Israel's hope of restoration

The "generations" structure keeps the story looking forward to each man's descendants, to the hope of the future.

God and man

The nineteen lessons in this guide are just an introduction to the Book of Beginnings. We will follow the main plot from two perspectives. From one angle, we will look at God—His nature and character as revealed through His words and actions. From another angle, we will look at man—who he is and should be, what God wants him to do, and what he does. We will trace God’s plan of redemption through Genesis from God’s side and from man’s, always looking for lessons for our own lives.

The best way to begin studying a book is to read it straight through and outline it broadly for yourself. Since we expect most users of this guide won’t want to read all of Genesis first, we’ve given you the outlines on pages 10 and 13. If you can, read as much of Genesis as possible with these outlines to guide you before beginning lesson two.

For the group

This “For the group” section and those in later lessons are meant as possible ways of organizing your discussions. Select whatever suits your group.

Worship. Some groups like to begin with prayer and/or singing. Some pray briefly at the beginning for the Holy Spirit’s guidance but leave extended prayer until after the study. Others prefer just to chat and have refreshments for a while and then move to the study, leaving worship until the end. You might experiment with different structures until you find one that suits your group.

Warm-up. Many people find it hard to dive into a Bible discussion when their thoughts are still on what they did during the day. Starting with singing or prayer can help people make the transition from business to Bible study, but many groups like to begin with a brief warm-up question.

As you start a new study, whether your group has been together for a long time or has several new members, you may want to discuss what each person hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of Genesis, and out of whatever else you might do together. How much emphasis would you like to put on prayer, study, outreach to others, singing, sharing, and so on? What are your goals for personal growth, service to others, etc.? If you have someone write down members’ hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. Discuss what you hope to *give* as well as *get* in your group.

How to Use This Study. Make sure that the group is committed to preparing each lesson ahead of time. Point out the optional questions, the “Study Skills,” and the “Study Aids” appendix on pages 211-215. If necessary, examine how members’ goals for the group can be met; for instance, do you need

to allow two weeks per lesson in order to save more time for prayer and sharing? Answer any questions members have about the study.

Introduction. You could do all of the preceding parts of this “For the group” when you first give members their study guides, and come the next week prepared to begin here and move to lesson one.

Here are some questions to clarify the key points of pages 9-13.

1. What does *Genesis* mean?
2. What are some of the themes of Genesis?
3. Summarize the plot of Genesis, using the four key events of chapters 1-11 and the four key men of chapters 12-50 to guide you.
4. Why does Genesis repeat the phrase “these are the generations of . . .” ten times?
5. Who wrote Genesis? Who were the author’s original audience, and what were they going through at the time?
6. What does *Law (Torah)* mean? In what sense is Genesis part of God’s Law?
7. How does Genesis fit into the overall message of the Old Testament and the whole Bible?

Discuss some ways in which Genesis is relevant to your lives as Christians. Why is it important for you to know the origins of the world, man, and sin? Why do Christians need to know what God promised to Abraham and his descendants, and what happened to Abraham’s family?

1. J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1966), volume 1, page 29.
2. James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, volume 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1982), page 90.
3. For a more thorough statement of the documentary theory, see John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, second edition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956); or E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957); or Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).
For arguments against the documentary theory, see Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1967), pages 16-26; Boice, pages 273-275; E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale Press, 1964), pages 107-154; E. J. Young, *In the Beginning: Genesis Chapters 1 to 3 and the Authority of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976); U. Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Magnes Press, 1961).
4. *The NIV Study Bible*, edited by Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1985), page 27.
5. For more on this subject, see Kidner, pages 26-31; Boice, pages 13-77. Boice includes extensive footnotes, including *God and the Astronomers* by Robert Jastrow, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* by Henry M. Morris, *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History* by Francis A. Schaeffer, and *Creation Revealed: A Study of Genesis Chapter One in the Light of Modern Science* by Frederick A. Filby.
6. Adapted from Meredith G. Kline, “Genesis,” *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, D. Guthrie, J. A. Motyer, A. M. Stibbs, D. J. Wiseman, editors (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), page 81.