

## Clergy Notes, Genesis Session 1

Friends,

Welcome to your Essentials Group on the Book of Genesis!

One of the things leaders asked for in the previous study we did on the Gospel of Mark was more material on the readings. So, rather than offer photocopied resources or supplementary readings (that folks probably won't read!), we thought it could be helpful to simply offer a short, informal set of notes for each gathering regarding the section of text you'll be studying. All very easy, not required, but hopefully helpful! Here we have them for Session 1.

### Genesis 1-5

#### Focus text: 1:26-31

1. A quick note on the strangeness of Genesis itself. People tend to find the Old Testament (OT) much more challenging to read than the New Testament (NT). In part that's because the OT was written so much earlier than the NT; some books of the OT emerged as long ago as the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. Think about it; what other texts do you read that are that old? Almost assuredly none (there are, in fact, few texts as old or stable as the Bible). Now, on the other hand, we have to remember that Scripture is, according to *every* major Christian tradition, divine in origin. Think for a moment about what that might mean that a text comes from God. One of the basic things it would mean is that it would have the potential to be very strange. God is other. And so his words are not predictable. Here's another way to think about it: Imagine being a classmate of Jesus in high school... what do you think he would have been like? Would you like him? Would you spend your free time with him? I think he would certainly have been somewhat strange... not weird or off putting, but he wouldn't fit into all of the categories you might have, as he is bigger than all of our categories! The same is true with Scripture... these are God's words, and there are strange sections, exhilarating sections, and everything in between. Scripture does not have to be comprehended. It actually, what a mystery (!), comprehends us. So we turn to it relentlessly.
2. Note how little chapters 1 and 2 include regarding what life is like in the garden of Eden. This is a major struggle for people. What was life *supposed* to be like? Scripture really doesn't tell us. What it is clearly communicated here, however, is the way life is after the fall. That's suggestive; it's almost as if Scripture cares very little about what things could have been. It cares a lot, rather, about telling us exactly what life is like now.
3. The fall is a short section, but it should be seen as having major ramifications. We'll get into this to a much greater degree later, but do think of the murder of Abel, the flood, and the Tower of Babel as representative examples of what sin has done and what it means. In other words, sin is a big deal.

4. Plenty of folks are baffled about where the snake comes from (the snake has basically always been understood to be the Satan). Satan (or, the tempter, as he has sometimes been called) is understood to be a created being (not included explicitly in the creation accounts,(however some have speculated that his arrival in the garden was, in fact, his fall)), who decided to turn from God (Luke 10:18 mentions this). This is important because it means Christianity is not dualistic. Evil is not on the same level of power or agency as God. God gave freedom to his creatures, and they, thus, had the freedom to turn away from him. Our world is not one where the powers of good and evil do battle endlessly. God is accomplishing his purposes in this world according to a plan that is wise—and he will do it.
5. Being made in God's image is a *huge* deal within the Christian theological tradition. It explains things like 1) our rationality, 2) our relationality, 3) our use of language, 4) the difference between us and other good creatures, and lots of other things.
6. Gender might become a topic of discussion in your group. It's in the text, so I would not try avoid talking about. However, do acknowledge that it is a sensitive topic. Plenty of people have strong feelings here. One thing that Scripture seems relatively clear about in this area, however, is that gender is not a human construct. It's given by God, and that can mean a lot of things.
7. Finally, people wrestle quite a bit with the historicity of this text. How did it get written? Where did it come from? There are a variety of theories here, but most of them involve some kind of theory about oral transmission, which is a legitimate description, as oral cultures do carry history in this way quite well (as opposed to textual cultures, like ours, that don't). Additionally, what Scripture is inspired means, at the very least, is that God was intimately involved in the collection, development, and dissemination of these texts. Ie. there is something very special and mysterious about how they came to be.
8. Ok, really finally, another helpful detail when speaking about the historical veracity of these texts is to speak of the sheer volume of scriptural manuscripts we see in the ancient world. There are certainly variations in some of the manuscripts that scholars find, but there is no other text in human history that comes remotely close to the Bible in terms of the amount of stable manuscripts we have collected from early antiquity. For instance, there are around 300 manuscripts of Homer's *Odyssey* that we currently have from antiquity and the middle ages (oddly enough there are far more of the *Iliad*). But from the ancient world alone there are *hundreds of thousands* of manuscripts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that it is all true (though I obviously think they are). It just means that there is something very special about the Old Testament. It's as if God had a plan for it...

I hope this all helps in some way!

God's peace,

Your St. George's Clergy