



# previously on planet earth

## **Previously on planet earth...**

Leaders' notes and sample studies

Draft edition

September 2014

## Background notes

These studies are an exercise in what academics call “Biblical Theology” – which is simply reading the whole Bible together as one coherent story.

The Old Testament was written by many different authors over a long period of time, but it has one message: a message about God, his creation, and the incredible lengths he went to in order to save it.

## How these sample studies work

- Each study has an observation/interpretation section, and an implications section. Try to leave a good amount of time for the implications.
- I have given you some alternative questions in grey in case you have extra time, a super speedy group, or you don't like the other questions.
- Along the way I have put comments for you in grey boxes – mostly explaining what we're trying to do in the group, or giving extra theological or pastoral notes.

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# 1. Three creation stories

## Icebreaking question:

Go around the circle and share your favourite place on planet earth.

If the group is new or has newcomers, you might like to enforce a name amnesty: everyone gives their name and says something about themselves (what they're studying, where they work, where they were born) before answering the question above.

## Where are we headed?

We begin today at the beginning, when God created the whole world. The Bible contains a few different descriptions of creation, which all contribute to our picture in different ways. We're going to look at three of them today: two from Genesis and one from the New Testament.

**Big idea: God is the Lord of creation, who made everything very good. (Later we discover that everything was made through Jesus, and for Jesus.)**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

## Observation and interpretation

Read Genesis 1:1-2:3

- What is your first impression of the way that the story is written?
- Things are often repeated for emphasis. On each day of creation there are repeated phrases. What are they and what do they emphasise?
- Give each member of the group a post-it note and assign them a day to read (you may need to double up). Get them to describe what happens on that day. Once they are done, arrange them in order on the table and get each person to talk through their day.

This activity is about carefully reading through the order of creation. We'll see in a moment that the second creation account is a bit different.

Read Gen 2:4-9

- What differences do you notice about the two creation accounts?

Depending on your group, you might want to expand the reading to the end of chapter 2. This will raise some interesting implication questions about how we are to "steward" the environment.

## **Sneak peak at the end of the book**

Each week we focus on one part of the big story of God and humanity. We could leave it here, and wait to see how the story develops.

The problem is, though, most people are not going to want to wait till the end of the series to start applying the passages to their own situation. And if we just apply the passage as it is, without going through Jesus first, we're going to end up teaching people how to live as ancient Jews, not as Christians.

So, in each study we're going to "flick to the end of the book" – by asking how the material in this passage relates to Jesus. Only then will we try to apply it to us.

Read Colossians 1:15-16

- What does this passage add to our understanding of creation?
- What do the phrases "through him" and "for him" mean?

### **Implications**

Why did God create the world?

Can evolution and Genesis 1-2 be reconciled?

Should followers of Jesus care about protecting the environment?

### **Prayer ideas**

- Give thanks for our creation
- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

## 2. Fall

Genesis 2-3

### Icebreaking question:

Go around the circle – what was the most trouble you ever got in at school?

### Where are we headed?

There was nothing bad in the good world that God made. But he did give our first parents a choice: whether to respect him or disrespect him as their creator.

**Big idea: Humanity's bad choices brought sin into the world, and with it violence, suffering and death. But God will not give up on the world he made.**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

### Observation and interpretation

Read 2:8-18

- What restrictions did God put on the Man?
- Is the woman present when God issues these restrictions?
- Is God being unfair by restricting humanity in this way?

Read 3:1-13

- How does the serpent encourage them to eat the fruit?
- What does it mean to know both Good and Evil?
- What happens to their relationship with each other once they disobey God?
- What happens to their relationship with God once they disobey him?
- Why do you think Adam and Eve hide from the Lord (verse 8)?

When sin enters the world, death comes too. This is probably not just the physical process of cells dying – after all, for Adam and Eve to eat from the other trees in the garden (Gen 2:16) implies that plants can die. The death that enters the world here is a new and outrageous thing: the death of humans. Human death is as much about their spiritual state towards God, as it is the physical reality of decay. Cut off from God, they are cut off from the tree of life (3:22) and so cannot live forever.

Read 3:14-24

- What are the consequences of their disobedience?
- Has God given up on his creation? (verses 14-15 and 21 may be helpful)

## Sneak peak at the end of the story

There are a few ways that you can link this story to Jesus. I've given some options below – choose the most appropriate one depending on your group.

Re-read Genesis 3:14-15.

- What two things are prophesied here about the snake and Eve's future son?
- How does Jesus fulfil these two prophecies?

**Promise and fulfilment.** This first option above picks up the vague promise and shows how Jesus fulfils the expectation of a figure who would eventually destroy evil (represented by the snake) but at cost to himself.

It's tempting to think that we would have done something different to Adam and Eve. But has anyone ever completely resisted the devil? (Suggestion: Matthew 4:8-11 might be helpful.)

Read Romans 5:12-14 or 1 Corinthians 15:20-22. How does Jesus finish the story of Adam?

**Typology.** Both these options pick up on Jesus as the final and greater Adam. While Adam failed to obey God, Jesus resists the devil on our behalf.

A good word to describe the way Jesus fulfils and goes beyond Old Testament figures is "typology". It's like when you say that "this person is the next Steve Jobs" – you mean that this person somehow lives up to the legacy of the great one who went before. Typology is like this, except that it works in reverse: the person who comes first (Moses) is a shadow of the great one who is to come (Jesus).

How can God destroy sin, which causes so much suffering, without destroying the world he has made?

**Tension + resolution.** This is more abstract but a powerful way that a story fits together is by looking at how Jesus resolves the puzzles or tensions in the backstory. Here we have a massive tension: God won't give up on the world and humanity but he can't tolerate sin. It is only resolved when Jesus arrives and (as our representative and substitute) pays the just penalty for our sin.

## Implications

We still live in a world scarred by sin. How does knowing Jesus help us live in this world?

We all want to be known and loved, but many of us fear the exposure that intimacy brings (the more someone knows us, and what we're really like, the less they will want to love us). How does Jesus help us out here?

If the fall has brought sin into the world, does this mean that we aren't responsible for our actions?

What can we expect from our a) work b) relationship with each other c) relationship with God ever since the fall?

**Prayer ideas**

- Pray for those who are experiencing the pain of a broken world more than average
- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

### 3. Abraham

Genesis 12 & 15

#### Icebreaking question:

How did you come to live in Australia (i.e. did your ancestors move here, or have you always been here?)

If you could have three wishes what would they be?

#### Where are we headed?

Last time we saw that, while humans disrespected their creator, God would not give up on the good world he made.

**Big idea: God chose Abraham to start a new nation – a pilot light for the whole world. They will receive God’s blessing, and in turn be a blessing to the whole world.**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

#### Observation and interpretation

Read Genesis 12:1-5

- What does Abraham get promised by God?
- What do you think it means for all people on earth to be blessed through him?

God chose Abraham to receive these promises: his descendants will be a great nation, have a great name and be a blessing to all humanity. But Abraham’s descendants are not just the recipients of these promises, but the model and the means by which these promises come to the whole world. I use the metaphor of a “pilot light” – in an oven or a hot water system a small flame is kept going, and eventually it ignites the whole into a big flame.

Read Genesis 15

- Why do you think Abraham wanted confirmation (verses 8-9) that God’s promises would come true?
- The cutting of the animals in half is an ancient way of making a treaty or agreement. What is Abraham doing while the agreement is made?

In this way of making treaties, the parties cut up some animals and walk through the middle, as if to say: “if I break this agreement let me be cut up like these animals”. But while Abraham is asleep, God walks through the middle for both of them. This could be interpreted as a sign of what is to come: God keeps his promises even when humans fail.



## **Sneak peak at the end of the book**

Most of us aren't descendants of Abraham. So how are God's promises to Abraham relevant to us? (Suggestion: read Galatians 3:14 and 3:29.)

Read Philippians 2:5-11. What did Jesus give up in order to save us?

Read Luke 22:20. Like Abraham, sometimes we have doubts that God will keep his promises. How do we know that God will deliver on what he has promised?

## **Implications**

What promises has God made to you?

Abraham was called to leave everything to follow God's promises. How does knowing Jesus help us take these kinds of risks?

Does God promise of the land around Jerusalem still stand for his descendants (the Jews) today?

## **Prayer ideas**

- Thank God that he is a keeper of big promises
- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

## 4. Exodus

Exodus 5-14

### Icebreaking question:

What's the worst experience you've had with bureaucracy (or some other authority figure)?

### Where are we headed?

God promised to bless Abraham's descendants, and through them the whole world. But his descendants could not receive the promises under God delivers them from their current situation of slavery.

**Big idea: God makes a nation for himself by bringing them out of slavery in Egypt.**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

### Observation and interpretation

Read Exodus 5:1-9

- Why won't Pharaoh let Israel go, and why does God insist?

*Activity: The Twitter wall*

Split these passages up amongst the group and ask these questions for each:

1. You are tweeting from Egypt – what's happening, in 165 characters or less?
2. What does it mean for Pharaoh to have his heart hardened? Is this something God does or Pharaoh does?
  - Exodus 7:8-13
  - Exodus 7:14-24
  - Exodus 7:25-8:15
  - Exodus 8:16-19
  - Exodus 8:20-30
  - Exodus 9:1-7
  - Exodus 9:8-12
  - Exodus 9:13-35
  - Exodus 10:1-20
  - Exodus 10:21-29
  - Exodus 11 to 12:42

Read Exodus 14:5-12

- What makes the Israelites want to go back to Pharaoh?

## **Sneak peak at the end of the book**

Read Hebrews 3:1-6.

- How is Jesus similar to Moses?
- How is Jesus greater than Moses?

We've already spoken about "typology" (see study 2). It is a useful technical word for the way Jesus fulfills and goes beyond Old Testament figures. The person who comes first (Moses) is a shadow of the great one who is to come (Jesus).

Moses was a great leader who led God's people out of slavery into God's blessing. Jesus is the final and greater Moses, who leads his people out of slavery to sin into the Kingdom of God.

## **Implications**

Read Galatians 4:8-9. Many people are still slaves to rulers other than God today. What are some of the things we allow ourselves to be captive to, and why do we keep going back to them?

## **Prayer ideas**

- Thank God for his redemption from slavery to sin.
- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

## 5. Life in the Kingdom

Exodus 19 – 20

### Icebreaking question:

Growing up, did your household have lots of rules? What were some that you remember?

### Where are we headed?

Last week we saw God make a people his own by bringing them out of slavery. It was an act of pure grace, followed up this week by another gift:

**Big idea: God calls his people to a good way of life, which will enable them to live with him.**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

### Observation and interpretation

Read Exodus 19:1-7

- Why should the Israelites keep the covenant (agreement, or treaty) which God is about to give them?
- Why do you think God chose Israel to be his chosen people? (You might like to look at Deut 7:7-9)

Read Exodus 20:1-17

- Focus on the first four commandments (verses 1-11). Who or what do they all relate to?
- Now look at commandments five to ten (verses 12-17). What do they have in common?
- What commandments do you find interesting or challenging?
- Is it right for God to be a jealous God (verse 4)?
- What does it mean to “misuse” the name of the Lord (verse 7)?

Generally speaking, the first four commandments are related to proper worship of God, and the second six are about how we treat other people. These commandments are the foundation for the covenant relationship between God and his people. The rest of Exodus spells out in more detail what loving God and loving their neighbours will look like.

It's important to note that the law was given to the Israelites *after* God had saved them. Their relationship was still based on grace (God's grace in choosing them) even though it required them to obey the law.

## Sneak peak at the end of the book

Read Matthew 5:17-20

- Jesus clarifies that he did not come to abolish the law. Why do you think people might have thought that Jesus was here to abolish the law of Moses?
- The Pharisees were exceptionally strict in their interpretation of the law of Moses, yet Jesus says that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees. How can anyone be saved then?

Read Matthew 5:27-30 (alternatively you can go with Murder, verses 21-22)

- How does Jesus (re)interpret the commandment not to commit adultery?
- How does Jesus' teaching here make you feel?
- How does knowing Jesus help us to keep this commandment?

## Implications

Read Hebrews 13:4-6

- Why do sexual immorality and greed seem so tempting to us? What hopes and fears drive these sins?
- How does the assurance that, as Christians, God will never leave us (verse 5) help us to "keep the marriage bed pure" (verse 4) and keep our lives "free from the love of money" (verse 6)?

Jesus empowers us through his life, his death and his Spirit to embrace a better life than sin can offer. The gospel refocuses our crooked desires to seek our security and fulfilment in Christ, not in sin. For example, I might fear being alone and so seek validation or intimacy in an unwise sexual relationship. Or I might resist sharing my money with the poor because I fear not having enough for the future. But if God will never leave me, if I have received the ultimate acceptance by God, and nothing can hurt me in a way God can't fix, then I don't need to settle for temporary and unsatisfying fixes.

Is perfect obedience to the law of Moses the only way to enter the kingdom of God? (Maybe look at Philippians 3:8-9, Romans 3:20-22 and Galatians 2:21.)

- Read Ephesians 4:1. What is the motivation that Paul gives for Christians to live good lives?
- In Romans 6:14 Paul insists that we are no longer "under law" but "under grace". So are the ten commandments still relevant to Christians today?

Some people think we are saved if we do good works. But the Christian gospel is a story about adoption, not works: we are adopted, we are saved, and therefore we live differently as a result. By God's grace we are saved, and by God's grace we begin more and more to live up to our new identity.

The Old Testament law is no longer binding on Christians, but it does provide a very useful starting point for demonstrating some things about the world, about God, and therefore how we should live.

While all Old Testament laws can be relevant to our thinking as Christians, it's sometimes helpful to distinguish three general types of laws we find in the Old Testament:

- Some of the laws are *ceremonial laws*. These are mostly only relevant within the temple system which no longer exists. While they tell us interesting things (and contribute to our knowledge of God) they are not to be obeyed. E.g. we are no longer to abstain from eating bacon (Deut 14:8).
- Some of the laws are *civil laws*. They are really only relevant for Israel, a society built around God's law. They show us something of God's concern for justice, which may suggest ways our society could be more just. But it is often not appropriate or even possible to grab these laws and try to legislate them in a different society. E.g. we do not ask our parliamentarians to legislate a death penalty for anyone who sacrifices their children to Molek (Lev 20:2).
- A lot of the laws could be described as *moral laws*. It is easier to see how these might inform our thinking as Christians. They tell us something about how the world should work, and how humans work best together. The implications are far broader than simply a list of things to obey, as Jesus showed us in the earlier example.

### **Prayer ideas**

- Thank God for his grace in bringing us into relationship with him.
- Ask for wisdom to know how to use our freedom from the law for good.
- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other.

## 6. King David

2 Samuel 7

### Icebreaking question

If you were King or Queen for a day, what road rules would you introduce?

### Where are we headed?

As God works to bring justice and restoration to the earth, he picks one nation to be a pilot light for the whole world – Israel. Up until this point Israel has had no king – they were ruled by God as their king. But they demanded a King, and got a disastrous one, Saul. But God didn't leave them in that situation – he gave them David. David was immensely successful – unifying the nation and bringing true worship to the centre of the nation's life.

**Big idea: God gave his people the best of human kings (but even he wasn't perfect)**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

### Observation and interpretation

Helpful passages to read for background: 1 Kings 8, 1Chronicles 17, 1Kings 5:3

Divide these passages amongst the group, and get each group to report back on what their passage contributes to the David story.

- 1 Samuel 15:24-26, 16:1-13
- 1 Samuel 17:4-11, 32-37, 42-51
- 2 Samuel 5:1-9
- 2 Samuel 7:1-17
- 2 Samuel 11:1-17, 12:7-10

Taking all this into account, how would you characterise David as a king?

### *Press conference activity*

Divide the bible study into two groups.

Each group is going to choose one of its members to be a character (Nathan for the first group, David for the second group). The group will then help their character answer questions from the other group in a mock press conference.

The groups should spend five minutes together working out the answer to the questions below. Nathan's group should look at 2Sam 7:1-17, and David's group will look at 2Sam 7:1-3 and 18-29.

The groups should face each other with the character (Nathan or David) in the middle. The Nathan group goes first, with Nathan answering questions from the other group (while his or her team mates help with the answer). After a few questions, move to the other group.

The interviewing team can make up your own questions in addition to the ones below.

2Sam 7:1-17	2Sam 7:1-3 and 18-29
Interviewee: Nathan	Interviewee: David
"Nathan you initially told David to go ahead with the plans for a new temple, what made you change your mind?"	"David, you had great plans for a temple. Why did you want to build a temple at this point in your career?"
"Did God not want a temple at all?"	"Were you annoyed that God stopped your plans?"
"Why was David not the one to build a temple?"	"What has God done in your life?"

This works well if you have a creative group that wants to get into the activity. Otherwise you could simply read the passages answer the questions in the table above

### **Sneak peak at the end of the book**

Re-read 2Sam 7:16. David was meant to start an everlasting kingdom, leading the whole nation in worship of God.

- What kind of king would be required to lead this everlasting kingdom?
- If David was such a great king, why didn't his kingdom last forever? Has God's promise failed?

Read 2 Timothy 2:8 or Matthew 1:1. Why is it important that Jesus is a descendant of David?

Read Acts 2:22-36.

- Who is Peter comparing in this speech?
- In what way is Jesus the final and greater David?

### **Implications**

Has Jesus' kingdom arrived yet?

How do you feel about Jesus being the new King David?



What would it mean to have Jesus as your King in every area of life? Perhaps you could talk about:

- a) Work
- b) Study
- c) Relationships

Christians are sometimes described metaphorically as forming part of a temple – a group amongst whom God dwells – which Jesus is building (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 or 2 Corinthians 6:16). What part should we play in his temple building operation?

### **Prayer ideas**

- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

## 7. Exile

Ezekiel 4

### Icebreaking question:

Given that Ezekiel spends some time acting things out in today's Bible readings, this might be a fun opportunity to play charades?

### Where are we headed?

God's promises of blessing to Abraham's descendants required them to keep living lives which suited their role as a model for the rest of the world. They failed time and time again.

**Big idea: God warned his people through the prophets about 70 years of exile unless they changed their ways. But they didn't listen.**

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

### Observation and interpretation

Read Ezekiel 4:1-8

- What's your initial reaction - any questions, comment or thoughts?
- In verse 1, who is speaking, and who is being addressed here? You may need to flick back to previous chapters.
- Re-read Ezekiel 4:2-3 with props

One person volunteers to read and another person volunteers to arrange objects on the floor as Ezekiel would have done.

- Focus on Ezekiel 4:4-8. Ezekiel is told to lie on his side one day for every year that Israel and Judah sinned. Which sinned the most, Judah or Israel?

Jerusalem is God's special city and Israel are his special people who he promised would never be abandoned or destroyed so long as they were faithful to their God.

- What does it mean for God to promise a siege against them?
- Read Deuteronomy 11:26-28. What kinds of things must Israel have done to end up at this point?
- Read Ezekiel 36:24-28. Is there any hope for Israel?

You might like to finish off this part of the study by reading 2 Chronicles 36:15-23.

### **Sneak peak at the end of the book**

Read Matthew 4:12-17 and then read Acts 1:6-8. Now that Jesus has come, has the restoration of the kingdom arrived? Or are we still waiting for the exile to be over?

### **Implications**

If God's chosen people fell away from their God by disobeying him, how do we know that as Christians we won't be exiled from Jesus' kingdom? (You may like to flick to a passage like Ephesians 2:8, or 1 Peter 2:24).

Read 1 Peter 1:1, and 2:11. In what ways is our experience similar to that of those who were exiled in Babylon?

### **Prayer ideas**

- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

## 8. Return

Ezra & Nehemiah

### Icebreaking question:

What's the saddest ending to a movie you can remember?

### Where are we headed?

Last week we saw the people of Jerusalem on the brink of 70 years of exile in Babylon because of their sin.

**Big idea:** after the exile the people of Jerusalem are able to return home, but the people have not learned their lesson, and muddle along in sin and compromise. It's going to take a miracle to bring about the promised kingdom.

*Invite the group to pray with you as we open the scriptures together.*

### Observation and interpretation

Read Ezra 1:1-6

- What does this passage tell you of the historical context to this story?

Many of the exiles do in fact return, and begin to rebuild Jerusalem. It's a bumpy process and takes a lot longer than they imagined. Progress is so slow... and we meet a character called Nehemiah.

Read Nehemiah 1:11b – 2:6

- Who is Nehemiah, and why is he so sad?
- What does he ask for? Does he get it?

Read Nehemiah 9:1-38

- Divide this passage among the group, and plot the different events on the whiteboard.
- Why didn't God put an end to the Israelites? (v31)
- What do the Israelites promise? (10:30, 10:31, 10:32-39)

Read Nehemiah 13:10-24

- What actually happened?

### Sneak peak at the end of the book

Read Malachi 3:17-4:6.

- This is the last book of the Old Testament in our Bibles. What are some words you could use to describe the mood at the end of this quick tour of the Old Testament?
- God's people have fallen woefully short – at this point in the story does it look like God will give up on his creation?
- What expectations are we left with for the future at this point?

Note: the Hebrew Old Testament is in a different order with a different final book. Our English Bibles take the order from the Greek version of the Old Testament (it's a long story).

Read Revelation 21:1-5

- This is an incredible image of a new Jerusalem. Why is a heavenly Jerusalem required – what is wrong with the earthly one?

### **Implications**

Why was it so important that the Israelites didn't intermarry with the other nations? Was it just that God is racist?

The people of God in Nehemiah's day quickly slid back into bad habits. How can we avoid making that same mistake?

What things have struck you on this tour through the Old Testament?

### **Prayer ideas**

- Break into smaller pairs or trios to share and pray specifically for each other

## **Bibliography and further reading**

Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel & Kingdom* (Paternoster)

Donald Robinson, *Faith's Framework* ([www.mountainstreetmedia.com](http://www.mountainstreetmedia.com))

James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Crossway)