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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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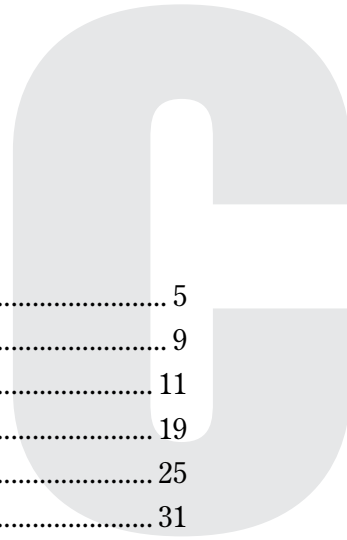
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# Introduction

Fans packed into Yankee stadium for the last home game of the 2008 season. Parents and children sat close. Celebrities took their seats in the front rows. ESPN cameras caught every tear and glance. Fans didn't come to watch a baseball game; the Yankees had been eliminated from the playoffs days before. Fans came to gather as family one last time in the "house that Ruth built." They came to relive their youth, to see a lifetime of recollections, to pay homage to a thousand memories. The field that hosted 37 World Series, featuring legends like Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, and Lou Gehrig, was closing.

In planned, poignant procession, Yankee greats—or their sons or daughters wearing the familiar pinstripe uniforms—took their positions at shortstop or left field. Generations of Yankee players appeared on the giant screen or trotted onto the field. In the final moment, Babe Ruth's own daughter, now in her nineties, tottered to the pitcher's mound and threw out the first pitch. Men wept. Siblings held hands. For millions of fans, the Yankees are not just a sports team; they are family. Since 1923 this field was their home.

Events like this tell a story, and they are part of a people's story. Stories define reality and invite us to join a group.

We all grew up with stories. Some are the big stories of our culture—heroes, historic events, and so on. Some are the stories of our community—how it started, how it grew to become what it is today. Some are the stories of our own family—who's in it, who acts like whom, who likes certain foods, and so on. If we get married, we learn another set of family stories, and they become part of our own.

When my wife was growing up, her family went camping in Oregon. After days in a campground they decided to dine in style one night. Her older brothers, adolescents at the time, could barely contain their ravenous hunger. One ordered a steak, and when he was asked, "How

would you like that done?” he said, “Large!” Though I joined the family twenty years later, I’ve heard that story so often that it’s part of my story too.

Wise business leaders know the power of story. A few years ago the *Harper Business Review* described the frustration and failure of CEOs who tried to impress employees or customers with graphs and figures. Their interesting charts didn’t change minds or motivate people, so creative leaders tried a new way. They invited movie producers into their company to teach their MBA graduates to tell stories.

Stories help us make sense of events in our life by putting them into a larger story line. When terrorists crashed planes into the Twin Towers of New York City on September 11, 2001, everyone tried to make sense of the tragedy. Whether or not they realized they were doing so, people put this dramatic event into a larger story line/narrative.

Some people said this tragedy happened because the United States had gone bad. The world was showing its hatred of the U.S. for being so domineering in world affairs, especially in the Middle East. Others said this happened because people were jealous of the success of U.S. and Western capitalism and wanted to take away their freedoms. Taking another approach, still others, including New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, said New York and the U.S. could rise from the ashes of this tragedy and become stronger. (Tim Keller made these observations in a lecture titled *Why Tell Stories?*—Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, N.Y., Feb. 5, 2004.)

## **An Invitation**

This study invites you to make sense of your own life story through the larger story of the Bible. It’s an invitation to connect your personal story to the ancient, life-giving story of the Bible.

For some of us, the Bible may seem odd at first. Dropping into the Bible as a first time reader can feel as disorienting as arriving in Paris and trying to navigate the subway system. Everything from language to symbols to connections may be unfamiliar.

For some others, the Bible may seem *too* familiar. Maybe it gives them bad memories of people who taught the Bible as a set of rules. Maybe they feel the Bible was being shoved down their throat.

We hope this study will feel like opening a family album. Sure, it pictures strange uncles and weird cousins, but it also describes majestic great aunts and other inspired leaders who help keep the family together in times of crisis. Most of all, it presents the God who wants us to have the best life possible. Maybe you’ll want to make this story your own.

Introducing *The Best American Short Stories 2008*, editor Salman Rushdie claims, “The human being . . . is the only creature on Earth that tells itself stories in order to understand what sort of creature it is.” We live in, with, and by stories every day, whoever we are.

This study aims to introduce the grand narrative of all who follow Jesus. It offers an overview to help readers see how their own story gains meaning when it’s connected to the timeless biblical story. We hope it whets your appetite to know more and to do some exploring of your own. God’s story is so big and so grand that you might discover your own story fitting into it in surprising ways. Like a lot of us, maybe you’ll find that the Bible is the book that understands you.

Ever wonder why God invites us to come to know him through stories? Why didn’t God just simplify his message into a two-sentence formula? Author Flannery O’Connor was once asked to put the meaning of one of her stories “in a nutshell.” She said that if she could have done that, she wouldn’t have had to write the story. Similarly, if God had wanted us to learn about him “in a nutshell,” maybe he’d have given us a bumper sticker instead of the Bible.



# How to Use This Book

## Format, schtormat

**T**his study follows a basic format of reading, reflection, and discussion. But if some group members are less than excited about reading, keep in mind that together as a group you can show there are other ways to share a story. There's always the option of summarizing what you've read in order to share it with someone else. Or you could practice the grand old tradition of oral storytelling. Feel free to adapt the material as a group to fit well with people's preferences and abilities, especially if doing so will help show everyone they are welcome.

## Read

The first part of each chapter or session includes a few pages that introduce major themes in God's drama. You'll find stories that touch on points that will come up for discussion later. You'll also find a "bio-sketch" on a person who has lived within God's overall story. None of these people are perfect, of course, but each is an example of the variety of folks who make up the ancient-to-modern story of faith.

## Reflect

To help everyone reflect on the stories and points of the first section, a "Song of Faith" is suggested from the book of Psalms. The Bible's psalms have given generations of believers words to sing and pray. Early church leader Athanasius (A.D. 296-373) said the psalms have "a very special grace" that portrays "the movements of the human soul." Bono (1960-), singer/songwriter of U2, has said, "Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do; they introduced me to God." These much-loved prayers and songs have helped people understand their identity as God's people.

## Read Some More and Discuss

The next part of each chapter or session focuses on Scripture (so you'll want to read from that too) and offers discussion questions. (Each person in the group will need a Bible handy.) We call this section "Think/Question/Talk Together," and it will be a basic guide for your time together as a small group. We hope it generates conversation, dialogue, and an interest in learning more about

God's story and how it connects with each person's story. This section will serve well if it leads you and your group to helpful answers and new questions.

**Pray**

Each chapter then ends with an example of Christian prayer. Enjoy!

# Birth (Creation)

GENESIS 1-2

## In the Beginning . . .

**T**ell someone the story of your beginning, and they'll understand you in a whole new way. Imagine beginning your story with "I was born in my parent's bathroom . . ." or "I was born the year after my parents fled Vietnam . . ." Everyone's experience begins a story begging to be told.

My oldest son cheers for the Minnesota Vikings. He watches their draft picks, studies their statistics, and wears their purple jerseys. He loves the Vikings even though he moved from the state of his birth, Minnesota, at the tender age of thirteen months and was raised for the next seventeen years in northern California. Birth, and sometimes adoption, determines and influences your sense of life and identity.

Sometimes the story of how a business began helps us see things in a new way. In December 1931, Dorothy and Ted Hustead bought the only drugstore in a small Dakota town with \$3,000 he'd received when his father died. Business was bad in this prairie town of 326 people, many of them wiped out by the Great Depression. They watched Model T Fords and other autos chugging along the two-lane highway, suitcases strapped to the rooves and running boards. He wished the travelers would stop even for a cup of coffee, but they didn't.

One hot July Sunday, Dorothy put their young children down for a nap and tried taking one herself. An hour later she came back saying she couldn't sleep; all the cars going by seemed to be rattling the house to pieces.

Then she told Ted she'd had an idea: they should put up signs on the highway advertising free water at their store. Soon travelers began stopping in, and today more than twenty thousand people visit Wall Drug in Wall, South Dakota, on a hot summer day. Each visitor navigates the labyrinth of shelves like the Model T passengers before them.

Like people or businesses, cultures also have their own story of beginning. The ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, and Greeks all had their own story of world inauguration. Each answered

questions like, *How did life begin? What is the human role in the universe? To whom are we responsible?* The story of our beginning shapes the way we see the world and act in it.

The Bible begins simply with “In the beginning . . .” That’s not much different from “Once upon a time . . .”—except that in the Bible’s first story, time was not created yet. Reading on, we learn more: “In the beginning *God* . . .” And that’s the central theme: God begins the action. To put it in movie terms, God writes, directs, produces, and does the main acting in the world’s story. All of human history—and more—is what follows.

## Bio-Sketch (a person in God’s story)

**A**s a thinker, he started slowly. At nine years old he could barely read, and his parents conferred with a brain specialist about his mental capacity. He dropped out of art school and skipped college. Later it turned out that his memory was so exceptional he could recite the plots of all ten thousand novels he had read.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton, say some, was the best writer of the twentieth century. He said something about everything, and he said most things better than anybody else. He wrote books, poems, plays, novels, and short stories, including a popular detective series featuring a Father Brown. G. K. Chesterton also considered himself a journalist, having written more than four thousand essays for newspapers and magazines.

Standing six-feet, four inches tall, with weight fluctuating between 300 and 400 pounds, Chesterton was a delightful subject for cartoonists. Some captured him with a few strokes in the shape of a giant capital *P*. During World War I, a woman met him on the street and criticized him for not being “at the front.” (Doctors would not clear him to go.) He replied, “Madam, if you walk around to my other side, you will see that I am!” He worked, ate, and drank too much. He loved the robust Catholicism of the Middle Ages, its feasts and hogsheads of wine—but avoided its fasting.

Chesterton walked through London streets wearing a cape and a crumpled hat, with tiny glasses pinched on his nose, a cigar in his mouth, and laughter blowing through his moustache. Famously eccentric, he usually had no idea where or when his next appointment was. He did most of his writing in train stations, since he usually missed the train he was supposed to catch. He once wired his wife saying, “Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?” “Home,” came her reply. He laughed at his own jokes and amused children at birthday parties by catching buns in his mouth. He made fun of

others but laughed most of all at himself. He could not fix his necktie; his wife told friends that he did not even know how to take it out of the drawer. He never came to terms with the telephone.

A famous debater in the days before television, Chesterton entertained overflow crowds at lecture halls with his defenses of the Christian faith against the great atheists of his day. After one debate he quipped, “Critics were almost entirely complimentary to what they were pleased to call my brilliant paradoxes—until they discovered that I really meant what I said.” As quoted in Philip Yancey’s book *Soul Survivor*, an opponent wrote, “To hear Chesterton’s howl of joy . . . to watch the effect of his sportsmanship on a shocked audience who were won to mirth by his intense and pea-hen-like quarks of joy was a sight and a sound for the gods.” After his debates Chesterton was often seen in a pub enjoying a meal with his antagonists.

Chesterton was continually thankful for the “birthday present of birth.” He modeled himself after St. Francis, who saw inexhaustible beauty in the most common of weeds, like the dandelion. Chesterton wrote that God is strong enough to exult in monotony. “Is it possible that God says every morning ‘do it again’ to the sun and every evening ‘do it again’ to the moon? It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike: it may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. It may be that he has the eternal appetite of infancy: for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”

In a world fascinated by the problem of pain, Chesterton was captured by the problem of pleasure. He found consumerism too thin to explain the sense of delight and magic-like wonder to basic human acts like play, sex, and artistic creation. He kept pointing to the Creator who lavished gifts on the world. He believed the riddles of God were finally more satisfying than answers proposed without God. One of his poems captures his gratitude:

Here dies another day  
during which I have had eyes, ears, and hands  
and the great world around me;  
and with tomorrow begins another.  
Why am I allowed two?



3. Genesis has two creation stories. Compare Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-25. How are these sections alike? How are they different? Why might the author include both?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Alternative theories of the world's beginning have existed in every century. Today many folks consider earth's beginning an accident or a random event. What are the implications for the Genesis version of beginnings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What is the role of human beings in the universe? How is it unique? What might that mean? How does the role of humans fit into the biblical story of the world's beginning?

6. From the perspective of your current occupation (teacher, plumber, business manager, maintenance worker, retiree, stay at home parent, student, etc.), how does an understanding of Genesis 1 affect your daily activities and your outlook on the world?
7. How might all creation be a trust? In what ways are human beings guardians of the trust? What might that mean for you?
8. What does the fundamental *goodness* of creation mean for your taste or your work in art? Music? Literature? Internet use?
9. With Genesis 1-2 as a background, consider the following quotes. What do you think of these statements?
- Augustine (A.D. 354-430): “We are made for God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him.”



- Lawyer-turned-pastor John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote, “Christians who have Scripture as a lens for viewing the world can also hope to learn something of the nature of the Creator, including his power, imagination, and sheer intelligence.”
- Simon Weil (1909-1943), a Jewish Christian, wrote, “The love we feel for the splendor of the heavens, the plain, the sea, and the mountains . . . the love we feel for sun, this love of which every human being has at least an inkling. This love is incomplete and painful. It calls us in, but we can’t get in.”
- J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), author of *The Lord of the Rings*, said humans are “sub-creators.”

**For Additional Reading:** Job 38-41; Psalm 19

O God of earth and altar,  
bow down and hear our cry,  
our earthly rulers falter,  
our people drift and die.  
The walls of gold entomb us,  
the swords of scorn divide,  
take not thy thunder from us,  
but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,  
from lies of tongue and pen,  
from all the easy speeches  
that comfort cruel men,  
from sale and profanation  
of honor and the sword,  
from sleep and from damnation,  
deliver us, good Lord!

Amen.

—G. K. Chesterton

pray