

January 1-7

God's Plan for All People - Act 1

The Bible contains the best story ever told, providing true answers to important questions such as: Who is God? How does He relate to the world? How can humans know him? How did we get here and why? How will things end for us and our world?

Like every good story, the Bible has a memorable setting, interesting characters, and a grand plot that climaxes in a glorious conclusion. The plot plows ahead with conflicts described at many levels, but ultimately the conflicts are resolved as God moves history toward its appointed purpose.

As you read the passages we have designated as Act 1, bear in mind that they are the foundation for Act 2 (God's Covenant People) and Act 3 (God's New Covenant People).

The Settings for Act 1

The settings for Act 1 are broad, beginning with the entire universe and then narrowing down to specific locales on earth. Although places such as Eden, Ararat, and the Tower of Babylon are named, we don't know exactly where they were. This really doesn't matter, for the narrator describes seminal events and conditions that apply to all humans no matter where they live.

Further, this part of the story is written in a way that makes the events hard to definitively date. The account starts "in the beginning" and extends to the time of Abraham, which was the dawn of recorded history. Clearly it's more important for us to know that these things happened to our ancestors than to know exactly when and where they occurred.

Main Characters for Act 1

God—He is the Creator of the setting and of all the other characters involved in the plotline. He is known through his words and his works. He will remain the central character throughout the whole Bible; after all it is his story. His greatness and goodness are on display in creation and in the pages of Scripture. His justice and mercy are especially seen in the way he responds to human sin. Without diminishing the gravity of sin, he provides a way for sin to be pardoned.

The Serpent (Satan)—Although the details of how and why he came to be in the garden are not explained in the narrative of Genesis 3 (although Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:12-19 and Revelation 12:7-9 provide some key details), the Serpent alters history as the antagonist who acts in opposition to God. After his deception of Adam and Eve, his direct presence disappears for the rest of Act 1. As Satan, he will show up more and more frequently as Acts 2 and 3 proceed. At the end of the Bible's storyline his final demise is foretold.

Adam and Eve—Our first parents are known for the impact of their words and deeds rather than by any description of their appearance. They are human beings made in the image of God, and made for and in relationship with God. Yet they choose break that relationship with God, disobey God, and seek to find more life apart from God. This sets in motion the central conflict of the Bible: rebellion (sin) against God. Since they are the parents of the entire human race, their sin shows that 100% of humanity became rebels against the Creator. It is impossible to understand the human condition today without making reference to Adam and Eve.

Noah and his family—These eight persons, imperfect but accounted righteous by God, are set in contrast to the rest of wicked humanity. Noah and his family are best known for building the ark and riding out the flood, but the theological importance of this should not be missed: they become the means by which God rescues the world from total imminent self-destruction, and provides our ancestors with a fresh start. Even so, in the aftermath of the flood, awful behavior continues with Noah and his descendants. God has given humanity a fresh start, and yet it remains true that all humans are sinners in need of salvation.

The people of Babylon—The “whole earth” is again in conflict with the Creator. Individuals go unnamed, but they all experience God's intervention and judgment, and are scattered. Sadly, in this last episode reported in Act 1, all humans are still rebels.

Plot Summary for Act 1

The plot for Act 1 can be summarized in three phases:

- *God's good creation*
- *Humanity's fall into sin*
- *Humanity's ongoing rebellion*

The action begins with God's creation of the universe from nothing, focusing in on planet Earth and then mankind. The results are said to be “very good.”

But quickly the scene changes to the temptation and fall of humanity into sin. Death is the intrinsic consequence of sin for Adam and Eve and all their descendants, because they separated from relationship with God who is the only source of life. And the depressing refrain “then he died” resounds like an ominous drumbeat throughout the biblical genealogies and down to our own day.

Later events demonstrate a pattern of broken relationships and rebellion against God: Cain murders Abel out of jealousy; the human race is so sinful that God sends a worldwide flood; people settle in Babylon (and try to reach heaven on their own) rather than scatter over the earth as God intended.

Despite the ongoing rebellion, there are glimmers of hope. God’s mercy breaks through undeserved: Adam and Eve live on to bear children rather than face immediate death for their sin; Noah finds favor with God in spite of his imperfections; after the flood God makes a covenant to preserve human life; God scatters (rather than destroys) the people despite their intention to disobey him.

As you read Act 1, use the lens of “God’s plan for all people” to help interpret the story.

In our first week of readings, we will cover all of Act 1 in the story of the Bible. This act consists of three scenes:

1. The creation of the world, with human beings as the pinnacle of that creation
2. The fall into sin and its consequences
3. The flood, the first intervention of God on behalf of the human race as a whole – a judgment which is really a rescue mission, preventing imminent total self-annihilation and thus preserving the life he created

Act 1 is very brief in comparison to the other two Acts in the biblical story, but theologically, it is very important. In numerous ways Act 1 lays the foundation for the rest of the Bible. In addition to the main events, we will see many expressions of God’s desire to have a relationship with people and his grace when people sin. As you read, slow down and notice the details, including moments of tension and crisis, and how these are resolved. This segment of Scripture is packed with important themes that will continue throughout all of Scripture, including the central theme of covenant. As you read Genesis 1 and Psalms, allow the music of these passages to touch you and teach you things about God.

Scene 1

Creation: The God of All of Life

With this foundational scene, the plot is set in motion. We observe truths about God, our world, and humanity that are essential for understanding the overall story.

First, God is the sovereign Creator of everything. There is no speculation on where God comes from or how he became powerful. He simply is.

Second, our world is created good; moreover, the world is not God. The universe depends on him.

Third, humans—male and female alike—are made in God’s image. We are not the random result of time and chance. Thus, God holds human beings in high regard and we are accountable to him.

Day 1

Read Genesis 1-2

Acts 1 - Scene 1 - Reading 1

Notice ways the days of creation relate to each other: day 1 to day 4, day 2 to day 5, and day 3 to day 6. Days 1, 2, and 3 tell of God's creation of settings to be inhabited, while days 4, 5, and 6 introduce the characters that inhabit those settings.

God built both beauty and order into his creation. There was also a progression in creation, a process climaxing in the creation of human beings.

According to Genesis 2:2-3, God rested on the seventh day, blessed that day, and declared it holy. In declaring the seventh day of the week special and holy, God built order and rhythm into the weekly human routine.

Identify the order and rhythm of rest in your weekly patterns.

In Genesis 2 the author took one aspect of the creation account in Genesis 1—the creation of man and woman—and expanded on it. When you read narrative passages in Scripture, remember that God is the hero of the story.

How is God the hero in Genesis 2?

What does the passage say about the nature and beauty of marriage as God designed it?

Day 2

Read Psalm 8; 104; John 1:1-3

Act 1 - Scene 1 - Reading 2

Psalm 8, a reflection on Genesis 1–2, describes our worth and responsibility as human beings. Think about what this psalm means for us as modern believers. Notice the first and last verses of the psalm; God is the real focus here.

Meditate on the description of God in Psalm 104:1-9 and notice how the psalmist responds to God in verses 33-35. The psalms often use rich word pictures to communicate truth.

How did the author paint a picture using word pictures?

Notice how the words of John 1:1-3, which speak of Jesus as the Word, echo Genesis 1:1.

Read Genesis 1:1 again in light of John 1:1-3 and take a moment to worship Jesus as the Creator of all that is.

Scene 2

The Fall: Rejecting God's Vision for Life

A lot of people talk about “worldview” these days. This refers to the framework someone has for understanding existence and the nature of reality.

Scene 1 answered a key question that a worldview must answer: Where did we come from?

Now scene 2 answers a second: What's gone wrong with us? Our first parents choose to break relationship with their Creator, becoming sinners, resulting in open rebellion against God. They pass down this sinful nature to their children.

The image of God is not destroyed by sin, but it is damaged. We humans are fallen creatures, and we have all followed our ancestors' path of rejecting God's vision and provision for life.

Day 3

Read Genesis 3-5

Act 1 - Scene 2 - Reading 1

Watch for the patterns of human sin depicted in Genesis 3–4: · Temptation to question God’s Word and his intention and heart towards us: “Did God really say . . . ?” (3:1).

- The false promise of desire
- The experience of shame and consequences of sin

Also notice the attempt to blame others for sin, the refusal to take responsibility for sinful actions.

Finally, notice that in chapter 4 the problem was not just with Cain’s offering but with Cain himself; this is a key to understanding the story.

How do these stories reflect your own battle with temptation?

Scene 3

The Flood: God Rescues Earth from Imminent Destruction and Makes a Covenant to Preserve Life

We now fast-forward to the time of Noah. The conflict of righteousness versus sin is on display. God's actions demonstrate his character and power. As Sovereign, he exercises his right to condemn and deal with evil so as to preserve life. He intervenes in creation for its survival by sending a global disaster. The destruction of the flood is an act of mercy, sparing the one and only family on earth committed to following him as the means of a new beginning for humanity. Further, he loves humanity so much that he enters a covenant (binding agreement), promising to withhold another such flood.

The episode about scattering the people of Babylon again shows God's justice and mercy as he again intervenes in human history to slow the ultimate self-destructiveness of the ongoing problem of human sin.

Day 4

Read Genesis 6-7

Act 1 - Scene 3 - Reading 1

Watch for details as you read today. Also keep the big picture in mind: the pervasiveness of sin and its devastating consequences.

Notice what we learn about God in the first eight verses of Genesis 6, keeping in mind that he is the main actor in the story. Watch for expressions of God's grace and his desire to preserve life in the midst of judgment.

Genesis 6:13 reads literally in the original Hebrew: "The end of all flesh has come before my face, for the earth is full of violence..." How does that reflect God's heart towards humanity as you read the last phrase of verse 13, "Behold, I will destroy them with the earth"? Is God's intent to destroy, or to save? How can we view the flood as an act of mercy, rather than a punitive judgment?

Also notice what we learn about Noah as the story continues: he was a righteous man and walked with God. Noah's responses called for a great deal of trust in God in the face of cataclysmic events, yet at times it is difficult for us to trust God in minor events of everyday life. Perhaps Noah's walk with God was the key.

How might you express your trust in God today and learn to walk with God every day?

Day 5

Read Genesis 8-9; Psalm 12

Act 1 - Scene 3 - Reading 2

Read Genesis 8:15–9:7, discerning how these verses echo the first three chapters of Genesis.

Why might the author have included these echoes?

Now read chapter 9 and notice the differences from Genesis 1–3.

How do these differences develop the overall story of Genesis?

A covenant with God is often at the heart of the story of the Old Testament. A covenant is basically an agreement between two parties. God established a covenant with the Israelite people, first through Abraham, and then renewed it with various leaders throughout the Old Testament. The covenant stated that if the people kept God's law (choose to live life God's way, by returning to relationship with him), he would be their God, and they would be his people.

Day 6

Read Genesis 10-11

Act 1 - Scene 3 - Reading 3

Genealogies in the Bible strike some readers as uninteresting. However, these are part of God's Word, and we can learn from them. Among other things, the genealogies give us a sense of the passing of time, moving the story along. We also get a picture of the connectedness of people and events in the Bible's narrative. This is not a patchwork of loosely connected stories, but one story God is writing on the world.

Meditate on the contrasts you find in Genesis 11:1-9. Now read the passage in light of Acts 2:1-21, noticing both the contrasts and the parallels with that passage. One problem reflected in Genesis 11 is that these people had an arrogant disregard for God's mandate to "fill the earth" (Gn 9:1). Think about how that mandate was ultimately fulfilled through the church in Acts as it advanced the kingdom of God in the world.

How are you called to participate in God's mandate to "fill the earth" by sharing the good news with others?

Day 7

Reading Summary for Week 1

What a week of readings! We have celebrated God's greatness in Psalms. We've moved from God's creating the universe and humanity, to the fall and then to the flood, and on through many generations. These accounts of our shared ancestors cheer us (because we too bear God's image) and shame us (because all our ancestors were rebels). God's saving plan, revealed in the rest of Scripture, is necessary because we cannot save ourselves.

Prayer/Meditation

Thank you, God, for these accounts describing both the origin of my race and the awfulness of sin against you. O God of creation, I praise you for your greatness and your goodness. You wisely made all things and gave the earth to humanity to care for it. I submit myself to you again today as my loving Creator. Thanks for the privilege of bearing your image. Help me never forget the glory and the guilt of being Adam and Eve's descendant. Amen.
