CREATION: RESPECTING LIMITS, PRESERVING LIFE
A BIBLE STUDY BY DEBORAH STORIE
This Bible study is from the forTomorrow series. The others focus on family, social, economic and institutional barriers that prevent women from experiencing fullness of life and explored means of overcoming them. This study focuses on God-given limits (barriers or boundaries) that preserve life and ought not be overcome. When we over-reach these limits, we impoverish our own and all future generations.

Setting the scene

The Living Planet Report estimates that as a planet, we passed the ecological break-even point about four decades ago, and now consume about 50% more resources than the earth can provide. Consumption and pollution patterns are not uniform: some people consume and pollute much more than others. The Living Planet Report estimates that if all the world lived like average Australians, we would need more than three planets to support us. There is no getting around the fact that things Australians consider normal – even commendable – deny life and dignity to others. When we take more than our share others have less than they need. Globally, as more land and other resources are used to produce goods and services (air and car travel, houses and furnishings, disposable technologies, food and fashion), provide experiences (holidays, adventures, retreats, retirement) and generate the profits wealthy people demand, poorer people lose access to resources their lives and livelihoods depend on (land, waterways, forests, public services), environments are degraded, biodiversity suffers and climates change. The experiences of communities like those with which TEAR Australia’s Partner Organisations work illustrate the local consequences of these global forces for particular people and places.

Engaging scripture

Too often we approach the Bible through predetermined ideas about what each passage teaches that reflect our culture and context. We tend to study scripture as if it addressed questions that biblical communities did not and could not have asked. Wealthy readers tend to overlook the economic dimensions of scripture. Urban readers routinely overlook ecological dimensions of scripture. Modern and post-modern readers tend to individualise and personalise much of the Bible.

When it comes to Genesis 1–3, intransigent debates are waged about how God created the world and whether or not evolutionary theory challenges biblical authority. This study asks you to put these debates aside and listen to Genesis 1–3 as a story about what God created the world for, rather than as a description of how it was created. Reading Genesis 1–3 as poetry – not science nor history – helps us appreciate its profound truth and rich insights rather than worrying about “awkward differences” between chapters 1 and 2. Poetry is notoriously difficult to translate. Rhythm, rhyme, repetition, wordplay and imagery are language- and culture-dependent. Translating words and phrases too literally flattens poetry to prose, unravelling subtle connections and allusions — stripping it of rhetorical force and transcendent meaning. In this case the wordplay between the earth (Hebrew: adadam) and the earthling (adam,2 and between man (ish) and woman (isha) are particularly important. The script we will read retains this wordplay rather than using different words to translate the same or related Hebrew words.3 Immersing ourselves in the poetic rhythms and cadences of scripture, we may even glimpse something of God’s delight in creation and recover a fuller sense of our God-given vocation to keep and care for the earth.

Suggested method

Before the group meets

Facilitators should familiarise themselves with the study materials: Setting the scene; Genesis script; Observations, questions, stories.

It is more important for the group to attend to the Genesis text, drinking it in and really hearing it, than it is to work through the observations, questions and stories. You will need to decide which questions to ask and choose which observations and stories to share with your group. Ideally, the group’s questions and observations will guide your input. Remember that most questions have no right or wrong answers.

It is important that the group avoid debating evolution versus creationism or the relationship between science and scripture. Think ahead about how you will gently and respectfully refocus the group should such issues arise.

If you decide to spread the study over several evenings, make sure you read and reflect on the whole of Genesis 1–3 each evening rather than breaking it into sections. The structure and language of these chapters show that they are meant to be read together. We get an incomplete and distorted picture if we read its different perspectives independently.

During the group study

(1) Explain how the study will proceed and when you expect to finish.

(2) Read or summarise the sections entitled “Setting the scene” and “Engaging scripture”.

(3) Allocate voices and read the Genesis script out loud. If your group has fewer than 8 members, combine voices A and D, and C and E, for Perspectives Two and Three.

(4) Share first impressions. What did group members notice?

(5) Share a few of the textual observations before slowly reading the passage again.

(6) Spend 3–5 minutes in silent reflection. Members may use highlighters or pencils to mark connections between various parts of the text, or to note rhythms and repetitions.


2 The wordplay is lost in many common English versions of the Bible which translate adamah variously as “ground” or “earth”, adam as “humankind”, “man” or “Adam”, and isha as “wife” or “woman”. Note that the Greek text of Genesis translates adam as anthropos (human) until 2:15 when it transliterates adam as Adam. The Greek text uses anthropos again at 2:18 and 2:24, and uses Adam throughout the rest of Chapter 3. The Greek text usually translates the Hebrew ish as andros (man) except at 2:24 where it has anthropos (human).
(7) What do you notice now? How do you feel about the reading?

(8) Discuss some of the questions or stories.

(9) Repeat steps (5) to (8) if helpful and if time permits.

(10) After the group’s final reading of Genesis 1–3, read the script without any commentary and move straight to prayer.

Observations, questions, stories

Genesis 1 repeatedly affirms the goodness of creation (1:4, 8, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)

The pattern breaks when the earthlings are created. Rather than receiving a separate statement about their goodness, the goodness of the earthlings is affirmed along with the goodness of all creation (1:31).

The Hebrew term (tov) translated “good” does not simply distinguish between morally good and bad, or between value and worthlessness. It conveys intense delight, a sense of something fantastic, amazing, splendid!

Question: How might God’s delight in creation inform how we relate to ourselves, each other and the world around us?

The generations of heaven and earth (2:4)

Generations or “genealogies” have an important function in Genesis, explaining the kinship relations between characters and places.4 Genesis 1 explains how God relates to creation and intended different parts of creation to relate to God and to each other.

Question: Does thinking of Genesis 1 as a genealogy affect how you read it?

Sabbath: the culmination of creation (2:1–3)

The poetic structure of Gen 1–2:5 emphasises time more than matter or space. God creates light and separates it from darkness (1:3–5). As morning follows evening, the text pronounces the succession of days. On the fourth day, God creates luminaries to govern the passage of time (days, months, seasons, years). On the seventh day, God completes heaven and earth, rests, and blesses and sanctifies the seventh day (2:1–4).

God sanctifies no part of the physical universe nor any living being – only the day on which God rests. Sabbath observance is grounded in the very structure of the universe. Celebrating Sabbath, rightly understood, reminds us of our place and role in this universe.

Questions: How do you feel about Sabbath observance? Is it something you practise? What does celebrating Sabbath look like today? How does keeping the Sabbath promote environmental, social and economic justice?

Questions: Why do many churches deride Sabbath observance as “legalistic”? Why is it so counter-cultural? Are addiction, fear, sin or idolatry involved?

Some groups might want to discuss “More thoughts on the ecological implications of Sabbath”:

Earth and earthlings (1:26–31; 2:7–25)5

The words adama (earth) and adam (earthling) occur 29 and 27 times in Genesis 1–3, lending a decidedly “earthy” tone to the narrative.6 The connection between adaman (earthling) and adamah (earth) implied at 1:25–28 becomes explicit at 2:7: the earthling is created out of the earth – as are all living things (2:9, 2:19).

The repetitive phrases of 1:25a, 1:27–28 are radically democratising.

1:25a Then God said, “Let us make humankind (adam) in our image...”

1:27 So God created humankind (adam) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

1:28 God blessed them, and God said to them... (NRSV)

Every woman and every man is made in God’s image (1:25a). Male and female together reflect the image of God. Male and female together are blessed (1:28). Male and female are commissioned as God’s representatives to subdue the earth and govern life on earth in ways that image God (1:28).

In the second account, the emergence of plants awaits someone to till the earth (2:5). God places the newly created earthling in the garden to till and to keep it (2:15). Humans image God, draw our very existence from the earth, and are responsible to care for the earth from which we came.

Question: What implications does the intimate connection between humankind, the earth, and all creation have for discipleship?

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion" (1:28)

Until recently, Western Christians understood this statement as a blessing for endless population growth and a warrant to use and abuse creation which, or so they believed, God had given to humankind for their purposes.

Questions: How do we understand the command, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”, in the context of an exhausted planet with exponential population growth? What can we learn from the following insight from Uganda?

An elder of a Grandparents’ Association in Kampala:

“In the beginning, God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. That was in the beginning when the earth was empty and there was no-one to look after the land. The land needed people to care for it, so God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and fill the earth and farm and care for it.

The earth is not empty now. We obeyed the first part of God’s command very well. We obeyed it too well for too long. There is no longer enough land for everyone so we are...

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5 The perspectives offered by chapters 1–3 are complementary and interdependent. The opening words of the second perspective, In that day... (2:4b) alert us to a different point of view. Time has already begun. The third perspective introduces the serpent (3:1) whose voice encourages the woman to question God’s point of view.

6 In Hebrew, adam is a singular noun with a collective meaning (like “staff” or “sheep”). It can refer to earthlings (humanity as a whole) or to an individual earthing (human).
forced off the land and pushed into cities where we face all kinds of dangers and our children and grand-children grow up strangers to the land to which they belong.

Now that the earth is full, we need to obey the second part of God’s command: to care for the earth. It seems that we have forgotten that command.”

The language of “subdue” (kabash) and “have dominion” (radah) is undeniably harsh. These terms are associated with violent, coercive force elsewhere in the Bible where they mean “bring into bondage”, “dominate”, “subdue”, “plunder”, “rape” or “enslave”.

The creation story brings different meanings into play. The human vocation is described with quite different language and imagery later in the text (2:15): humans are to “till” (abad) and “keep” (shamar) the garden. Outside Genesis 1–3, abad connotes servitude, and shamar means to conserve life or observe the covenant. Created from the earth, the earthlings are placed in the garden to serve and preserve it.

Other observations

1:28 God commissions humankind in a context of blessing with a clear expectation of fruitfulness.

Human dominion is inherently limited because, made in God’s image (1:27), we are accountable to God: we are not God.

God does not commission humankind to have dominion over non-living parts of creation: the earth, seas and waterways, and the heavens are not included.

1:29–30 God gives the fruit of the earth to the earthlings, a gift also given to other living beings, a gift to be shared.


The act of creation sets limits (boundaries, barriers) on all creation

Genesis begins with the limits of time (In the beginning) and proceeds immediately to the limits of space (the heavens and the earth).

- The creation of light places limits (boundaries, barriers) on darkness.
- The creation of the dome establishes limits on the waters above.
- The creation of dry land establishes limits on the seas.
- The creation of Sabbath establishes limits to creative work.

Limits to human action implied at 1:26–30 are established more explicitly when God tells the earthlings not to touch or take the fruit of a certain tree (2:16–17). God prohibits something they have the ability and opportunity to do. God requires restraint. We are not told why God put a tree whose fruit humans were not to touch or eat in the garden, nor how or why they would die if they ate the fruit. Even in Eden, there are things that the earthlings can but should not do.

Questions: How do you feel about seemingly arbitrary prohibitions? Do you resist limits when their rationale and the consequences of breaking them are unclear?

The law and the prophets speak more directly about God-given limits. Deuteronomy 17:14–20 sets limits to how Israel’s kings should exercise power. Isaiah 5:1–10 condemns those who accumulate more than their share of land and property. Ezekiel 34:17–20 rebukes those who satisfy themselves without considering the needs of others or worrying about the mess left behind. Only through respecting God-ordained limits can we love God and neighbour.

Questions: Does our culture distinguish between what can and should be done? Within our society, what types of restraint are mocked and what upheld?

Men and women

Adam’s need for companionship (2:18, 20b) and the nature of the partnership God envisioned are often misunderstood. Elsewhere in the Bible, the Hebrew term ezer (helper or helpmeet) refers to those who help or deliver the oppressed or besieged (Job 29:12; Psalm 107:12; Daniel 11:33) and are often used of God (2 Kings 14:26; Psalm 30:1; 54:6; 72:12). There is no reason to suppose that in Genesis 2 (and only there!) the word refers to a subordinate person or role.

Plants, the earthling (adam), animals and birds are created from the earth, the woman is created from Adam (2:21–22). This does not suggest that woman is secondary to the man but that, having the same substance, they are suitable partners: they belong. Adam’s response expresses profound solidarity:

This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman (ishah), for out of man (ish) this one was taken (2:23, NRSV).

The figurative idiom “flesh and bone” represents an entire person with bone implying strength and flesh implying weakness: “The man sees [the woman] as the strength of his strength and the weakness of his weakness.”7

Question: Do male-female relationships have environmental consequences? How do human interactions with the environment affect gender relationships?

Genesis 3 tells the story of how the relationship between God and humankind was broken, how human-human relations disintegrate, and how these broken relationships affect all creation. Note that the earth which did not sin is cursed (3:17) and that the earthlings are not cursed but will experience the consequences of sin. “Thorns and thistles” (3:18) are signs of damaged, eroded land. When humans turn from God, the earth is the first to suffer.

"Until you return to the earth from which you were taken” (3:19) is not necessarily about death. It could equally refer to returning to God and the vocation God originally gave us: to serve and preserve the earth. The prophets describe ecological consequences of human sin, anticipate the ecological consequences of repentance, and anticipate the divine

7 Dianne Bergant, Genesis: In the Beginning (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2013), 12.
restoration of creation (Isaiah 24:1–6; Ezekiel 34:22–31; Hosea 4:1b–3; Romans 8:18–21).

Question: How are human relationships with God, other people, and the natural environment interconnected?

Some thoughts from Mick Pope

• Only God can liberate creation from frustration.
• We groan with creation, empathetically feeling its suffering and the suffering that others experience as a result of human misrule.
• Living in the light of the redemption that creation will share with us, we hope that God will return and put everything to rights.
• This hope energises action. We feel guilt but are not paralysed by it.
• Hope informs our sense of justice as we work to alleviate the suffering of the earth and of those who suffer because of environmental degradation.
• Jesus’ call to make disciples of all nations includes not only instruction of right belief and practice in personal virtues, but also peace, justice and wise rule over creation.

More thoughts on the ecological implications of Sabbath

Celebrating Sabbath reminds us of our place and role in the universe.

God urges us to rest and contemplate the world around us, celebrate the wonder of creation, and be thankful.

All creation is a gift of God: the earth belongs to God; we depend on God for sustenance, for life itself.

God entrusted the earth to human, to serve and care for it, to preserve its beauty and diversity.

All people are made in the image of God and should not be exploited.

All societies, people, animals and even the land are entitled to rest.

There are limits to human endeavour, to profit-making, to wealth-accumulation.

Celebrating Sabbath is a way of loving God, neighbour and creation.

Scripture affirms the importance of Sabbath as gift, promise and command.

Sabbath rest is included in the Ten Commandments where it extends to all people and domestic animals (Exodus 20:10–11; Deuteronomy 6:14–15).

God’s miraculous provision of manna follows a Sabbath rhythm (Exodus 16; 35:2–3; Leviticus 16).

Israel observes special Sabbaths where they stopped to worship God or to prepare for or remember momentous events (Leviticus 16:31; 23:23–44).

The concept of Sabbath is extended to Sabbatical Years when the land enjoys complete rest, and Jubilee Years when relationships are restored by freeing slaves and forgiving debts (Leviticus 25; 28:34–35).

Some Scriptures use Sabbath observance as a shorthand for doing the justice and righteousness God requires (Exodus 31:13–17; Leviticus 26:2–3; Nehemiah 9:13–14; Isaiah 56:1-7; Ezekiel 44:24), and desecration of the Sabbath as a shorthand for Israel turning from God and oppressing the poor (Ezekiel 20:1–24; Amos 8:4–5).

Resources


Perspective One  
**Genesis 1:1–2:4a**

A: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

B: Then God said, “Let there be light.”

A: And there was light.

C: And God saw that the light was good.

D: And God separated the light from the darkness.

E: God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

B: And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”

D: So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome.

A: And it was so.

E: God called the dome Sky.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

B: And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.”

D: So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind.

C: And God saw that it was good.

B: God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

B: And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.”

A: And it was so.

D: God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

B: Then God said, “Let us make earthlings in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

D: So God created earthlings in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

B: God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

C: And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

B: 2And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.”

D: So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind.

C: And God saw that it was good.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

B: 3Then God said, “Let there be light.”

A: And there was light.

C: And God saw that the light was good.

D: And God separated the light from the darkness.

E: God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

B: 4And God said, “Let there be light.”

A: And there was light.

C: And God saw that the light was good.

D: And God separated the light from the darkness.

E: God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

B: So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome.

A: And it was so.

E: God called the dome Sky.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

B: So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind.

C: And God saw that it was good.

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All: And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

B: God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

B: Then God said, “Let us make earthlings in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

D: So God created earthlings in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

B: God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

20God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”

A: And it was so.

C: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

All: And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

A: Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

D: And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

C: So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

All: These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.
Perspective Two  Genesis 2:4b–10a, 15–25

A: In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the earth; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground.

D: Then the Lord God formed the earthling from the dust of the earth, and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils; and the earthling became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the earthling whom God had formed.

A: Out of the earth the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden.

C: The Lord God took and placed the earthling in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

B: And the Lord God commanded the earthling, *You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*

16Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the earthling should be alone; I will make him a helper as a partner."

D: So out of the earth the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the earthling to see what he would call them.

E: And whatever the earthling called each living creature, that was its name. The earthling gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; But for the earthling there was not found a helper as a partner.

D: So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the earthling, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the earthling he made into a woman** and brought her to Adam.

F: Then the earthling said,

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man** this one was taken."

C: Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman, and they become one flesh.

All: And the earthling and his woman were both naked, and were not ashamed.

* The Greek text of Genesis transliterates Hebrew adam to Greek Adam for the first time at 2:16.

** In the Hebrew text, isha (woman) first appears at 2:22 and ish (man) at 2:23.
And to the earthling he said,
“Because you have listened to the voice of your woman,
and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you,
“You shall not eat of it”,
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

The earthling named his woman Eve, because she was
the mother of all who live.

And the Lord God made garments of skins for the
earthling and his woman, and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, “See, the earthling has become
like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now he might
reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and
eat, and live for ever.”

Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden
of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

God drove the earthling out; and at the east of the
garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword
flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.