



LEADER'S GUIDE

FROM THE EDITOR

The Bible studies in the July–September 2026 issue of *Good Faith Magazine* stay in two books: Luke and Genesis. Instead of moving in and out of the lectionary as we have in previous months, these studies are standalone sections that will give participants a window into two similar but distinct types of writing that make up the biblical witness.



The parables in Luke offer a way to see the way of Jesus through his favorite form of teaching — storytelling. They invite readers to imagine in new ways and to notice obscure and seemingly incidental elements of stories as hinge points that can unlock a world of meaning. The early chapters of Genesis, which will continue into the October–December issue, also invite readers into the world of story, albeit one far more ancient and strange than the parables in Luke.

Deviating from the lectionary during this time makes sense for a couple of reasons. First, the study of Luke’s parables falls entirely within July and August. Group members who are in and out for the summer will be able to start with a fresh parable each week. The study of the early chapters of Genesis begins in September, around the time most people are back home from summer vacations. Second, there are no significant Christian holidays to anchor readers in the lectionary during the summer.

We hope these studies spark engaging and refreshing conversations among members of your small groups.

Sincerely,
Craig Nash
Senior Editor

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A Note about the Lectionary

Depending on your church background, you may or may not be familiar with the term lectionary. The word comes from the Latin *lectio*, which means reading. The Latin *lectionarium* means “book of readings.” Different church traditions utilize different lectionaries, but they all have the same purpose — to provide a broad reading of the Bible over a set period of time. The most common lectionary for Protestant Christians is the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which runs on a three-year cycle. The RCL was compiled by scholars and representatives from numerous Christian denominations, including the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Churches USA, and the United Methodist Church, just to name a few.

Good Faith Bible Studies stays close to the lectionary during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. At other times throughout the year, we seek for our studies to be informed by the lectionary, but not bound by it. The July–September 2026 installment is the one time all year when, instead of using the lectionary, we have taken a theme-based approach. The majority of weeks are spent on the parables of Jesus in Luke, while the last four weeks begin a study of the early chapters of Genesis. We will return to periodic lectionary passages in the October–December 2026 issue.

Luke 7:36-50 — The Parable of Two Debtors

Lesson Written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Today's passage follows a familiar pattern for the parables Jesus tells. Often, something is happening around him that sets up a teaching moment, which he responds to with a story rather than a list of principles, before returning to what is happening in front of him. This particular story stands out because what is going on in front of Jesus — the woman anointing his feet with her tears and expensive perfume — is arguably a far more beautiful story than the parable Jesus tells to answer the Pharisee who questioned his legitimacy over what was going on.

Because Mary Alice Birdwhistell has chosen to expand her lesson to include both the setup (the story of the woman) and the parable (the two debtors), there are numerous angles for you to approach a conversation with your small group. It may be helpful to create a list of all the possibilities while preparing for the lesson.

Finally, to address the elephant in the room: This lesson falls on July 5, 2026, the day after Independence Day and during the weekend marking the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. There are a couple of challenges to deal with here. First, attendance in your group will likely be down. Second, there really isn't an easy connection point between what will be on many of your group members' minds — Independence Day — and the lesson. Lean into that dissonance, recognizing that discipleship and a life that follows Jesus transcend national boundaries and celebrations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage. Pick those you feel will be most helpful for your group:

1. Mary Alice Birdwhistell begins by reflecting on the power of smell to unlock memory and emotion. Have you ever had a scent immediately take you back to a particular person, place, or moment? How might thinking about smell help us enter this passage differently?

2. In Luke's telling, the woman is unnamed and identified only as "a sinner," while Simon is named and socially respectable. How do those labels shape the way people in the room likely saw each of them? How might those labels shape the way we first read the story?
3. The woman's act of devotion is physically intimate, emotionally vulnerable, and socially disruptive. What do you think made her actions so unsettling to Simon? What might make this scene uncomfortable for us as modern readers?
4. Jesus' parable of the two debtors is simple, but it exposes something important about Simon. What do you think Simon understands correctly in the parable? What does he still seem unable or unwilling to see?
5. Mary Alice writes that "watering down sin also means watering down grace." How have you experienced traditions or communities that either overemphasized sin in harmful ways or avoided the language of sin almost entirely? What might be lost in either approach?
6. Jesus tells Simon, "The one to whom little is forgiven loves little." What do you think it means to become more aware of our own need for forgiveness without becoming trapped in shame? How might that awareness shape the way we receive grace and extend it to others?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In her lesson, Mary Alice Birdwhistell quotes Debbie Thomas. You can read Thomas's full thoughts [here](#) or scan the QR code.



The Good Faith Bible Studies podcast is free on all podcast streaming apps: Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google. Listen to a discussion of this week's Scriptures and lessons with Senior Editor Craig Nash.



Luke 12:13-21 —**The Parable of the Rich Fool**

Lesson Written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

A good Bible teacher can help provide context for a story, preventing readers from going down unhelpful rabbit holes. Mary Alice Birdwhistell, a great Bible teacher, has done so with this lesson by explaining that rabbis in the ancient world were often called upon to settle inheritance disputes. Without this information, it would be easy to think that the person in the crowd calling for Jesus to instruct his brother on their inheritance was something out of left field. The out-of-the-ordinary part of this story, then, is that Jesus refuses to settle the dispute, not that he was asked to. Instead, he tells a story about greed. Notice that Jesus doesn't say who the story is aimed at — the brother with the inheritance or the one asking for a portion of it. He just leaves the story hanging in the air, as if it is for all of us.

Since we introduced an “elephant in the room” last week (Independence Day), it may be helpful to introduce another this week: There may be someone in your group (maybe even yourself) who is a person of great wealth, or moving in that direction. How does that affect the way you approach a story like this? Are there temptations to sanitize the story? Lean into that discomfort, as it may be holy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage. Pick those you feel will be most helpful for your group:

1. Mary Alice Birdwhistell opens with the example of Beanie Babies and the illusion of scarcity. What are some examples from your own life, or from our broader culture, where people have been persuaded to grab, save, or hoard something because they feared there would not be enough?

2. The man in the crowd asks Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute, which would not have been an unusual request for a rabbi. Why do you think Jesus refuses to arbitrate the dispute and instead tells a story about greed? What does that shift suggest about what Jesus sees beneath the surface of the man's request?
3. Jesus does not say whether the parable is aimed at the brother who has the inheritance or the brother asking for a portion of it. What difference does it make that Jesus leaves the story hanging in the air for everyone to hear?
4. At first glance, the farmer seems responsible and successful. He has a strong harvest, makes a plan, and prepares for the future. What, then, makes him “foolish”? Where is the line between wise preparation and the kind of self-protective accumulation Jesus warns against?
5. Mary Alice points out that the farmer's inner monologue is filled with “I” and “my,” but contains no gratitude toward God and no thought of neighbor. How can abundance distort our sense of dependence on God and our responsibility to others?
6. This parable can be uncomfortable to discuss in communities where some people have significant wealth, financial security, or institutional resources. What are the temptations to soften or sanitize this story? What might it look like to lean into that discomfort as something holy rather than something to avoid?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are five sermons in A Sermon for Every Sunday that tackle this passage. Take a look at them [here](#) or scan the QR code on your phone.



Luke 12:35-38 —**Parable of the Watchful Servants**

Lesson Written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

The pop star George Michael was known for infectious, catchy earworms that, once you got them into your head, you couldn't stop singing them, whether you liked the songs or not. One humorous example is the song "Last Christmas" by Wham!, the duo he was a part of in the early 1980s with his schoolmate Andrew Ridgeley. That saccharine tune is so "everywhere" during Christmastime that there is now an online game where people attempt to go the entire season without hearing it. Once they do, they share with the world that they are "out," naming the time and place where the song came across their ears.

What this obscures is that Michael could actually be a deep, prophetic lyricist. One of his most powerful songs was titled "Praying for Time," from his 1990 album *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*. In the song, he laments the state of a world marked by need, greed, and selfishness. In an arresting lyric near the end of the song, he speculates that, perhaps, Jesus hasn't returned "because he has no children to come back for."

It's probably a general reality that many of the groups that use Good Faith Bible Studies don't hold to end-times theologies that are obsessed with the imminent return of Jesus. There are good reasons for that, but it is worth asking, "What do we miss when we aren't always on watch?" This week's lesson allows us to ponder that question.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mary Alice Birdwhistell opens by naming the acceleration of modern life — the feeling that everything is moving faster and faster. Where do you feel that acceleration most in your own life? How does it affect your ability to be present to God, to others, and to yourself?
2. Jesus tells his listeners to be "dressed for action" and to "keep your lamps lit." What

images or feelings do those phrases bring to mind? How is this kind of readiness different from anxiety, busyness, or frantic religious striving?

3. The servants in the parable are waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, but when he arrives, he does something unexpected: He serves them. How does that reversal change the way you understand what it means to "keep watch"?
4. Many progressive or moderate Christian communities are understandably cautious about end-times theologies focused on fear, speculation, or escape from the world. But what might we lose when we stop thinking seriously about the return of Jesus altogether?
5. In the lesson, Mary Alice describes Brenda Bradley as someone who lived awake to the moment, especially after receiving a terminal diagnosis. Have you ever known someone who seemed especially alert to the gift of life? What did that person teach you?
6. George Michael's "Praying for Time" imagines a world marked by need, greed, and selfishness, then wonders whether Jesus has no children to come back for. What would it mean for a community of faith to live as though Jesus really does have people to come back for? How might that shape the way we spend our time, attention, and love?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mary Alice Birdwhistell quoted E. Trey Clark in her lesson. Read more of his commentary on the larger passage these verses are found in [here](#) or use the QR code below.



Luke 14:1-24**The Parable of the Great Banquet**

Lesson Written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

In this week's lesson, Mary Alice Birdwhistell quotes Fred Craddock: "The radicality of the text should not be missed. Both the synagogue and the church are constitutionally committed to the care of the poor and the disabled... Here, however, Jesus is not calling on Christians to provide for [their] needs; he says to invite them to dinner."

There's a popular refrain that almost always appears in religious conversations about caring for the poor and the marginalized, including unborn children and immigrants. It takes some form of the question, "Why isn't the church taking care of them?" That question often overlooks the reality that Christian institutions are at the forefront of benevolence ministries and charities that uplift the downtrodden. As Craddock notes, those are great and necessary endeavors, but this parable is calling for something different. It isn't calling for charity, but for a reordering of society in which "those people" aren't seen as people to be helped but as people to be included.

For churches, this requires a lot of soul-searching about the power dynamics at play in our community ministries. Are our efforts dismantling or upholding the social systems that make us the "helpers" and others the "helpees"?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are several sermons available for this text in [A Sermon for Every Sunday](#) that may be helpful in your preparation. Click the link above or scan with your phone to view.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage.

1. Mary Alice Birdwhistell opens with Joshilyn Jackson's story about a child being turned away from church for not being properly dressed. Have you ever witnessed, experienced, or participated in a moment when someone was made to feel they did not belong in a church or faith community? What made that moment so powerful?
2. Luke repeatedly shows Jesus eating with people whose presence at the table unsettled others. Why do you think meals are such an important setting in Luke's Gospel? What can happen around a table that might not happen in a sanctuary, classroom, or formal gathering?
3. In the parable, the original invited guests offer excuses that publicly reject the host's invitation. What are some ways people today might reject the invitation to God's table, not necessarily through open hostility, but through distraction, status, comfort, or competing priorities?
4. Fred Craddock notes that Jesus is not merely calling people to provide for the poor and disabled, but to invite them to dinner. What is the difference between helping someone from a distance and including them at the table? Why does that distinction matter?
5. Many churches are deeply involved in benevolence ministries, food pantries, shelters, and other forms of charity. How can churches examine whether those ministries are dismantling unhealthy power dynamics or unintentionally reinforcing a divide between "helpers" and "helpees"?
6. The lesson ends with the harder question: not whether we believe in a big table, but who we would rather not see seated there. Who are the people or groups that might challenge your vision of God's table? What would it take to imagine them not as problems to be solved, but as people to be included?

Luke 15:3-32 — The Parables of the Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son

Lesson written by Sean Palmer

Sean Palmer opens this week's lesson by casually implying that these three stories — the lost sheep, coin, and son — are actually one parable, and, in fact, the most famous of them all. Although “most famous” is subjective, you'd probably be hard-pressed to find someone who wouldn't agree that this story, culminating with the Prodigal Son story, is the most recognizable of all of Jesus' stories.

While it's true that “familiarity breeds contempt,” it's also true that the enduring legacy of this story is how it points to the brilliance of the parables, which is that they contain multitudes. The story of the Prodigal Son, in particular, is one of those that you can hold up to the sunlight like a diamond, spin it ever so slightly, and discover something new, even after you've read it hundreds of times in your lifetime.

An interesting approach to this lesson would be to begin by asking your group to list all the “lessons” they've ever learned from someone teaching this parable, and inviting them to consider whether there is something new they can learn from this reading of it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If the story of the prodigal son is the most famous of all the parables, the most famous reflection on the parable is Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. In it, he reflects on Rembrandt's depiction of the story. It would be an excellent book study as you prepare, as well as to encourage your group members to read.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before reading this lesson, how did you typically understand the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son?

Does Sean Palmer's suggestion that they function as a single parable change the way you read them?

2. Sean argues that the older brother is not an afterthought but the point of the story. Why do you think Jesus ends the parable outside the party rather than with the celebration? What effect does that ending have on the listener?
3. In all three stories, something is lost, someone searches, something is found, and a celebration follows. Why do you think joy and celebration are such important parts of Jesus' description of God? What does that tell us about the character of God?
4. The younger son assumes he must negotiate his way back into his father's good graces, but the father interrupts his speech and restores him before he can finish. Have there been times in your own life when you struggled to accept forgiveness, grace, or welcome that was freely offered?
5. Sean suggests that both sons are lost in different ways: one by leaving, the other by staying. What do you think he means by that? Which son do you find easier to identify with, and why?
6. The older brother is offended by grace because he believes his years of faithful service should count for something. Have you ever found yourself keeping score in your relationships with God or other people? What might it look like to move from a transactional understanding of love and faithfulness to a relational one?

The Good Faith Bible Studies podcast is free on all podcast streaming apps—Spotify, Apple, Google, or you can visit us at good-faithmedia.org.



Listen to an in-depth discussion of this week's Scriptures with Craig Nash.

Luke 16:1-13**Parable of the Shrewd Manager**

Lesson Written by Sean Palmer

It must be nice to hold the view that the Bible all makes sense and fits together perfectly, like a puzzle, if you just pray and read it enough! I'd love to know how those who believe such a thing feel when they get to the end of a parable like this one. Do they think, "Ok, yeah, we can make some sense of this," or "Easy peasy — who doesn't understand what Jesus is getting at here"? Or do their shoulders tense up as they think of all the other stories and teachings from the Bible that this one seems to turn upside down?

But the Bible is dynamic and welcomes the kind of discomfort that should arise when Rabbi Jesus holds up a dishonest manager as a paragon of virtue.

We've suggested this before, but today would be a perfect lesson to begin (or continue) a discussion about how people in your group approach reading the Bible. How do their individual approaches affect how they interpret this particular difficult passage?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sean Palmer opens by acknowledging that this parable still makes "the floor shift" beneath him, even after many readings. What is your first reaction to the Parable of the Shrewd Manager? Does it confuse you, bother you, intrigue you, or something else?
2. This is a difficult passage for anyone who wants the Bible to be immediately clear, consistent, and easy to apply. How do you usually respond when a biblical text does not seem to fit neatly with what you already believe about God, Jesus, or Scripture?
3. Sean notes that this parable falls between the lost parables in Luke 15 and the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. How does reading the story as part of Luke's

larger argument about wealth, status, and the kingdom help you make sense of it?

4. The manager is commended not for his character, but for his shrewdness — his urgency, clarity, and strategic action. Where do you see the world organizing itself more effectively around its values than the church organizes itself around the values of God's kingdom?
5. Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Why do you think he states this so absolutely? What are some ways money can become a master rather than a tool, even for people who would never describe themselves as greedy?
6. Sean writes that the question is not whether we have money, but whether money has us. How can we honestly examine the role money plays in our lives without turning the conversation into either shame or defensiveness? What might it look like to use money in service of release rather than extraction?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Since many of the parables we have tackled in this series require us to interrogate not just what we are reading, but how we are reading, it may be a good idea to introduce (or re-introduce) your group to the idea of hermeneutics.

One trusted source for this is Pete Enns, host of the *Bible for Normal People* podcast. A taste of Enns's work can be found in this [YouTube clip](#).



Luke 16:19-31**The Rich Man and Lazarus**

Lesson Written by Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

In this week's lesson, Jennifer Garcia Bashaw uses a tool of hermeneutics (Bible interpretation) that is incredibly underutilized in studying Scripture: naming not just what was written in a passage, but what is not. She notes that all we know about the rich man is that he was rich. We don't have any information about how he treated the beggar — whether he ignored him, hurt him, or helped him.

Lean heavily into this tool in teaching this lesson. Ask group members whether they've noticed this, and ask them about other stories from Scripture where they've assumed something was written that wasn't.

Also, as in a previous lesson, this one is heavily focused on wealth, which can be a tricky subject depending on your group. If any of them are well-traveled, ask them if they've noticed how we talk about personal wealth or income here in the United States as opposed to elsewhere in the world, and whether that affects how they read this passage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage.

1. Jennifer Garcia Bashaw points out that Jesus tells us the man is rich and Lazarus is poor, but does not tell us whether either one is righteous or wicked. Before reading this lesson, had you assumed something about the moral character of either person? What do you notice when those assumptions are set aside?
2. One helpful tool for reading Scripture is to notice not only what the text says but also what it does not say. Can you think of other biblical stories where readers often assume details that are not actually in the passage? How might that habit shape, or distort, our interpretation?

3. Jennifer argues that this parable is not primarily about heaven and hell, but about the chasm between the rich and the poor in this life. What changes when you read the story that way? What becomes more difficult to ignore?
4. Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers already have "Moses and the prophets." What parts of Scripture come to mind when you think about God's concern for the poor? Why do you think Jesus' audience — and we — so often need to be reminded of something Scripture says so clearly?
5. The rich man seems to notice Lazarus only when he believes Lazarus might be useful to him. Where do you see that kind of dynamic in our world, where the poor are noticed only when they can serve the needs, fears, or moral narratives of the wealthy?
6. Wealth can be a difficult subject to discuss honestly, especially in the United States, where many people are uncomfortable naming class, income, or economic power directly. How does the culture around us shape the way we read a parable like this? What might it look like to talk about wealth with more honesty and less defensiveness?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Sermon for Every Sunday has several sermons on this passage for you to [consider](#).



Luke 18:1-8**The Parable of the Persistent Widow**

Lesson Written by Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

In last week's lesson, Jennifer Garcia Bashaw pointed out something that doesn't exist in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (the actions or inactions of the rich man), but that we often read into the passage. In this week's parable, Jesus describes the person with power in very clear terms — he didn't fear God and didn't respect people. She also points out that this is one of the few times Jesus explains the point of the parable before telling the story.

However, Bashaw also explains that some scholars believe the brief explanation was added sometime after Luke wrote the manuscript of his gospel. She treats the passage as if it isn't there. This brings up a couple of opportunities for conversation.

First, gauge how your group responds to this. Ask them why it may or may not matter.

Second, if you have the tools available, introduce the idea of biblical manuscripts, copies, and textual variants — i.e., portions of our Bible that appear in some early copies but not in others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jennifer Garcia Bashaw notes that this parable is unusual because Luke appears to explain its meaning before Jesus tells the story. How do you respond to the idea that some scholars believe this introductory explanation may have been added later? Does that possibility trouble you, interest you, or not matter much to how you read the parable?
2. This lesson raises questions about how the Bible came to us through manuscripts, copies, and interpretive traditions. What did you learn growing up about how the Bible was written, preserved, and passed down? How has your

understanding of that process changed over time?

3. The judge in the parable is described as someone who neither fears God nor respects people. What kind of power does a person like that hold in a community? Where do you see similar dynamics today when those responsible for justice are indifferent to the people who need it most?
4. Jennifer warns against assuming that the authority figure in a parable always represents God. Why is that an important caution in this passage? How does the parable change when the judge is understood not as a picture of God, but as a foil to God?
5. The widow does not wait quietly for justice. She keeps showing up, publicly pressing her case until the judge can no longer ignore her. What does her persistence teach us about faithful action in the face of corrupt or indifferent systems?
6. The Greek phrase, often translated “wear me out,” can carry the sense of giving someone a black eye, whether literally or metaphorically. What might it mean for people seeking justice to give a “black eye” to unjust systems or those who uphold them? How can Christians discern the difference between faithful persistence and destructive retaliation?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

One fascinating pop culture resource to describe this parable is the story of *Erin Brockovich*, and the film that chronicled her story. It is rated R, so keep that in mind, but consider asking your group to watch it in advance of this lesson.



Listen to this week's episode of the Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast hosted by Craig Nash. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and more.

Luke 18:9-14: The Parable of the Praying Pharisee and Tax Collector

Lesson Written by Sean Palmer

In this passage, Jesus is following a familiar pattern of pairing similar parables alongside each other as a teaching tool. Last week's story was about a woman who persistently knocked on the door of a judge to get his attention, with Jesus lifting her as an exemplar of earnest prayer. The "be like this" person in today's parable is different from the persistent widow. Rather than being up close, Luke tells us that he prayed while standing "at a distance." Consider studying other similarities and differences between the characters in these stories as you prepare to lead your group.

Also, notice in this passage (as in many other passages) the liberal use of directional terms — up, down, away from, etc. Consider what Luke may be communicating with this phrasing.

Finally, this is the last week in our study of the parables of Jesus found in Luke. Take some time with your group to discuss what they've learned about parables, which ones were most meaningful to them, and how the study can enhance the ways they read other passages from the Bible.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Several sermons at A Sermon for Every Sunday either tackle this passage head-on or have it as a secondary [text](#). Click the link or scan the QR code with your phone to view.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage.

1. Sean Palmer writes that there is a kind of prayer that "does not reach God because it is not addressed to God." What do you think he means by that? Have you ever noticed prayer becoming more about self-assessment, comparison, or performance than honest communion with God?
2. Luke tells us this parable is aimed at those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Why do you think self-righteousness and contempt so often travel together? Can you think of examples where religious certainty leads people to look down on others?
3. Last week's parable lifted up a widow who stayed close to the judge and kept pressing for justice. This week's parable lifts up a tax collector who stands "far off" and can barely lift his eyes. What do these two very different examples teach us about prayer?
4. The Pharisee's prayer may be factually honest: He may really fast, tithe, and avoid certain public sins. What is the difference between gratitude for a faithful life and using one's faithfulness as a way to measure oneself against others?
5. Sean points out that the tax collector does not compare himself to anyone else. He simply asks God for mercy. Why is it so difficult to approach God without an inventory — either of our accomplishments or our failures?
6. This passage uses several directional images: the men go "up" to the temple, the tax collector stands "far off," and the justified man goes "down" to his home. What might Luke be communicating through this movement? How does the geography of the story help reveal its spiritual meaning?

Genesis 1:1-2:4a In the Beginning

Lesson written by Tyler Tankersley

This week will begin a study of what some scholars call the “primeval history” of the book of Genesis. These lessons are brought to us by Tyler Tankersley, who wrote an excellent series in April–June on the book of Amos.

This series begins with Genesis 1 and ends shortly after the beginning of Genesis 12. It would be helpful to begin this series by noticing how the stories in these chapters take a different shape and “feel” different than the stories that begin with the calling of Abraham in chapter 12. This will prompt necessary conversations about historicity, poetry, and metaphor. Don’t run from those, but don’t get bogged down in them either.

Although the early stories in Genesis are markedly different from the parables in Luke, there are some tools for reading the parables that can be helpful for interpreting these passages. What is written and what isn’t written? What is the importance of rhythm and repetition? (Tyler Tankersley expounds on this in his study.) How does the poetic nature of the passages allow for them to “breathe” and take on different meanings?

Lastly, like the parables, this passage (and all of the subsequent lessons in this issue of Good Faith Bible Studies) has limitless angles to tackle. Invite readers to find new things in each story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tyler Tankersley begins by noting that even the first words of Genesis can be translated in more than one faithful way: “In the beginning, God created...” or “When God began to create...” How does it affect your reading of Scripture to know that some passages open possibilities rather than closing them down?
2. This lesson begins our move from the parables of Luke to the early chapters of Genesis, sometimes called the “primeval

history.” How does Genesis 1 feel different from the stories that begin with Abraham in Genesis 12? What clues in the passage suggest that we are reading something poetic, theological, or symbolic rather than a straightforward modern history?

3. Tyler points to the rhythm and repetition of Genesis 1: God speaks, creation responds, and God calls it good. What do you notice when you pay attention to the structure, rhythm, and repeated phrases in this passage? How do those features shape the meaning of the story?
4. Genesis describes God creating not through violence or domination, but through speech, order, presence, and delight. How does that vision of divine power compare with the ways power is often exercised in our world? What might it mean for people made in God’s image to reflect that kind of power?
5. The lesson argues that “dominion” is better understood as responsibility than domination. How have you seen Genesis 1 used either to justify exploitation of creation or to call people toward ecological care? What difference does it make to see the earth as a community to which we belong rather than a resource to be used up?
6. At the end of the creation story, God rests and blesses rest. In a culture that often measures worth by productivity, what makes Sabbath such a countercultural practice? What would it look like to seek rhythms of rest while also naming the reality that rest is not equally accessible to everyone?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are two sermons at A Sermon for Every Sunday that use this passage as the primary text. Use this [link](#) or scan the QR code.



Genesis 2:4b-25

Creation Stories

Lesson written by Tyler Tankersley

As we have at various times in the past, it may be helpful here to name the “elephant in the room.” This week’s “elephant” is the belief by many scholars and readers of the Bible (including Tyler Tankersley and the Good Faith Media staff) that Genesis 2 isn’t a continuation of the creation story in Genesis 1, but rather a completely different telling of the story of creation. As we mentioned before, it is important to name this, but equally important not to get stuck on it. There’s too much treasure in each of these stories to spend too much time talking about what their differences are.

If Genesis 1 reads like poetry, Genesis 2 reads like an epic narrative. There’s so much there, and it all means something. As you approach this week’s study, center yourself on how much of ancient literature (including ancient biblical literature) is intended to explain why things are the way they are. Be prepared to lean into this as you lead this week’s discussion. From descriptions of freedom to discussions about why humans look for other humans and “pair up,” Tyler explores several of these etiologies in this week’s study.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

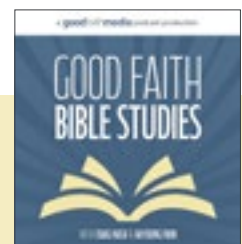
1. Tyler Tankersley notes that Genesis 2 feels very different from Genesis 1. Genesis 1 is sweeping, poetic, and cosmic, while Genesis 2 is more intimate, earthy, and narrative. What differences do you notice between the two creation stories? How might those differences help us rather than threaten us?

2. Many scholars and readers understand Genesis 2 as a separate creation account rather than a continuation of Genesis 1. How do you respond to that idea? What might it mean that Scripture begins with more than one way of telling the story of creation?
3. This story includes both freedom and limits: The human may freely eat of the trees in the garden, but not of one particular tree. Why do you think it is easy to focus on the restriction and miss the abundance? How might wise limits become part of human flourishing?
4. Genesis 2 names loneliness as “not good” before sin has entered the story. What does that suggest about the human need for relationship? How might this passage speak not only to marriage, but also to friendship, family, church, and other forms of mutual belonging?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you are interested in further exploring the two creation stories in Genesis, [BibleProject](#) has an excellent podcast series that discusses this from multiple angles

Listen to this week’s episode of the Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast hosted by Senior Editor Craig Nash. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and more.



Genesis 3:1-24

Creation Unravels

Lesson written by Tyler Tankersley

This week's passage can be seen as a continuation of last week's (second) creation story. If Genesis 2 described how it all began, Genesis 3 narrates when it all began to go wrong.

We've addressed (and in some cases, danced around) the fact that the primeval history narrated in Genesis 1–12 doesn't fit neatly into the boxes of "this happened" and "this didn't actually happen, but it means something" that modern readers expect their text to fit into. This reality may be especially important in this passage, as it affects the ways in which we approach New Testament passages, particularly Romans and other writings of Paul that address "original sin." Don't get distracted by this, but don't ignore it either. The introduction of sin (or brokenness or fracturing) into the world is an ancient story, and it's one that matters for the here and now.

Still, Tyler approaches this concept in a helpful way, introducing readers to more contemplative and mystical ways to read this story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage.

1. Tyler Tankersley frames Genesis 3 not simply as a story about "the first sin," but as a story about what happens when trust breaks down — between humans and God, between one another, and even within ourselves. How does that framing affect the way you read this passage?
2. The serpent begins by slightly distorting what God has said, shifting the focus from abundance to restriction. Where do you see that kind of distortion at work in your own life, in religious communities, or in the broader culture? Why is it so easy to lose sight of abundance and focus only on limits?
3. Genesis 3 has often been used in Christian

theology to talk about sin, brokenness, and, in some traditions, "original sin." How did you first learn to understand this story? Has your understanding of it changed over time?

4. After eating the fruit, the humans experience shame, cover themselves and hide from God. Tyler connects this to Thomas Merton's idea of the "false self." What are some ways we construct false selves out of fear, insecurity, or the desire to control how others see us?
5. God's first question to the humans is, "Where are you?" Tyler suggests this is not a question of condemnation, but an invitation. What difference does it make to hear that question as God moving toward humanity rather than away from it?
6. Near the end of the story, God clothes the humans and sends them out of the garden. How do you understand those actions? In what ways might they be both consequence and care, both loss and mercy?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Tyler mentions the concepts of the "true self" and "false self" that Thomas Merton wrote about. Much of Merton's teaching has been carried on through the work of Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation. [Consider reading excerpts from Merton's work or visiting Rohr's website for inspiration while preparing for this week's lesson.](#)



Genesis 4:1-16

Brother vs. Brother

Lesson written by Tyler Tankersley

In this week's passage, the fracture caused by sin spreads out like spiderweb cracks on a glass from humanity's relationship with God to their relationship with each other. But first, there is an opportunity for harmony in the relationship between brothers. When that goes south, God always works toward restoration.

In an earlier lesson on the second creation story, Tyler Tankersley mentioned that exile from the garden had a redemptive aspect to it, in that it removed humans from the source of their rebellion. There is a similar element in this story that often escapes our attention: the purpose of the "mark of Cain." This has been interpreted in numerous ways over the years, but the most predominant interpretations miss the fact that the mark was given as protection, not a curse. This is a good opportunity to return to the concept of "what the text says" and "what the text doesn't say" in your conversations with your small group about this text.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are many examples in literature and film that hold the truths found in this passage. Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is a book to refer to while studying this. One excellent film that illustrates the cumulative and generational impacts of brother-versus-brother violence is *Legends of the Fall*.

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Listen to an in-depth discussion of this week's Scriptures with Craig Nash and friends.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tyler Tankersley describes Genesis 4 as the continuation of creation's unraveling — what began as a fracture between humans and God now spreads into the relationship between brothers. How do you see that movement from Genesis 3 into Genesis 4? What changes when brokenness moves from hiding and blame into violence?
2. One of the unsettling parts of this story is that the text never clearly explains why God regards Abel's offering and not Cain's. How do you respond when Scripture leaves an important question unanswered? What difference does it make to focus less on why Cain's offering was rejected and more on how Cain responds?
3. Tyler suggests that Cain may be operating from a sense of scarcity — as though God's favor toward Abel means there is less favor available for him. Where do you see that kind of scarcity thinking in families, churches, communities, or the broader culture? How can comparison become spiritually dangerous?
4. Before Cain kills Abel, God comes to him with warning and invitation. What does this suggest about the moments before harm is done? Can you think of times when anger, resentment, or jealousy could have taken a destructive turn, but another path was still possible?
5. Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Tyler notes that the word "keeper" echoes the language of tending and caring for the garden. What does it mean to be one another's keepers? How might that responsibility challenge the individualism that shapes so much of our culture?
6. The "mark of Cain" has often been interpreted as a curse or a sign of shame, but the text presents it as a form of protection. What other assumptions have you heard or made about this story that may not actually be in the text? How does the story change when we notice that even after Cain's violence, God acts to preserve his life?

YOUR CURRICULUM WRITERS



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