

Sarah, Abraham and Joseph

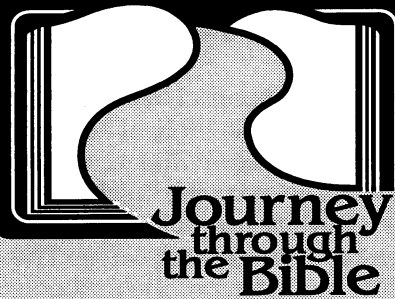
— Sessions 1-15

YEAR 1

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Contents

Introduction to the Course	3
Bible Story Sessions	
Early Stories	
Session 1: The Biblical Story Begins	7
Session 2: An Early Covenant and a Rainbow	10
Sarah and Abraham	
Session 3: The Call	13
Session 4: The Birth of Isaac	16
Session 5: Isaac’s Family	19
Session 6: Jacob and Esau	22
Session 7: The Ladder Dream	25
Session 8: Jacob’s Family	28
Session 9: Reconciliation	31
Session 10: Jacob at Bethel	34
Joseph’s Saga	
Session 11: From Home to Egypt	37
Session 12: Joseph with the Pharaoh	40
Session 13: The Brothers Come Begging	43
Session 14: Family Reunion	46
Review and Reflection	
Session 15: Review of Sessions 1-14	49
Special Days Sessions	
Celebrating the Church School Year	165
Celebrating Christmas	168
Celebrating Easter	171
Celebrating Pentecost	174



Today's Bible Story

A covenant with all creation

Genesis 6:9—9:17

The Larger Picture

Genesis 6:1—9:17

The Memory Verse

"God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'"

(Genesis 9:12-13)



An Early Covenant and a Rainbow

Where We're Going

During this session participants will:

- wrestle with the portrayal of God in the story of the flood
- think about God's relationship to "all flesh"

How We're Going to Get There

Hearing the story

Reading aloud

1 Silent reading was not practiced in the biblical world. You were *supposed* to move your lips and say the words! When we read the Bible out loud, we read it as its writers meant it to be read. Assign one person to read all of God's lines. For the narration, use a new reader in each paragraph. Notice that Noah doesn't have any lines!

Instead of trying to discuss the flood story on the basis of a few excerpts, read it all, from Genesis 6:5 to 9:17 (which takes about twelve minutes). If you absolutely must condense the story due to time constraints, omit 6:6 to 8:5.

Responding to the story

2 Let each person say what he or she finds interesting about the story. Some may be surprised that God is sorry "that he had made humankind on the earth" (6:6, 7). Others may notice that God's promise in 8:21 undoes one of the curses of the garden (Genesis 3:17).

Paragraph 4 of the "Bible Background" mentions that the story isn't consistent about how many pairs of animals board the ark. Perhaps your group noticed other differences of detail. *How comfortable are you with the idea that separate versions of the story have been merged together?*

Making the story your own

Deciding the tone of voice

3 How we respond to a Bible verse depends partly on what we think its tone of voice is. For instance, in Amos 4:4 God says, "Come to Bethel—and transgress; to Gilgal—and multiply transgression." Most people think God is being sarcastic. A few think God is seriously

ordering the Israelites to sin. The tone of voice makes a difference on your interpretation!

Early in the Noah story God saw “that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually,” and that “all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth” (6:5, 12; also notice 8:21). *Should we hear this as a factual observation that human inclinations are always only evil—or is this an exasperated overreaction on God’s part?* Look at 6:8–9 before you answer.

The “Bible Background” (paragraphs 2 and 5, page 12) mentions similar flood stories told by neighboring peoples. Based on this and your own observations, talk about the story’s tone. *Should it be read like a stock report? A children’s story? An eyewitness account? A sermon? Something else? Some combination?* Perhaps not everyone will agree. That is all right. Listen carefully, and ask questions if you’re not sure what someone means to say.

Thinking about God

4 Many parts of the Old Testament describe God as gracious and compassionate. Teachers of younger children using *Journey Through the Bible* will stress the rainbow and promise in today’s story. The “Bible Background” (paragraph 2) emphasizes the justice of God’s action, compared to the arbitrary behavior of gods in other flood stories. But people have also said that in this story God acts disturbingly like an abusive parent. The children misbehave. God is so angry that God regrets having produced them (6:6). God kills all but a tiny ark full of creatures. Afterwards, God promises never to strike out like that again. Then God decides to loosen up the rules (9:3).

How does the story’s picture of God fit with your beliefs? How does your understanding of the story’s tone (discussed in Activity 3) affect your reaction?

Thinking about people

5 Discuss the following questions:

- *How does this session’s scripture describe human beings? How well does this agree with your experience?*
- *What truths about human nature most affect your own day-to-day life?*

Thinking about covenant

6 Chapter 9 talks about a covenant between God and “every living creature.” A covenant is a solemn promise about a relationship. Look at what

the last three paragraphs of the “Bible Background” have to say about this particular covenant. Then get paper and *colored* crayons or markers—you can’t deal with the rainbow in black and white—and pretend you are children again. Draw your feelings about the rainbow covenant.

As you draw or after you are finished, talk about the rainbow covenant. *Is this covenant important? Do you like what it says? Since the covenant is made with “every living creature,” what are the implications for environmental ethics, pro and con?*

NOTE: Most adults feel silly drawing pictures, but they also discover that drawing (even very unartistically) is a powerful way to interact with scripture. How did it work for you?

Praying together

7 Hold hands. Imagine a rainbow arching over each person. Say a silent prayer that acknowledges God’s rainbow promise to us all.

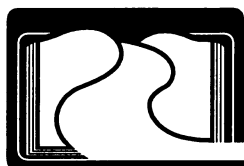
A little bit extra

• **Reading scripture in an interfaith context.** According to Jewish tradition, there are seven things God requires of all Noah’s descendants (that is, everybody): (1) no murder, (2) no idolatry, (3) respect for marriage bonds, (4) respectful treatment of animals, (5) no stealing, (6) no blasphemy, and (7) fair government and courts. According to the rabbis, a Gentile who observes these commandments has the same standing with God as a Jew who observes every commandment of the Torah.

How do you respond to this teaching? What would you add to or remove from the list? What do you believe about God’s relationship to people outside your faith community?

Looking Ahead

Next week we will follow Abraham and Sarah as they leave home at God’s call. What major life changes (marriage, moving, divorce, adoption, career choices, etc.) has God called you to? Bring a memento that symbolizes one of those decisions (for instance, pictures of an old house or your grandmother’s ring). Look in your church’s hymnal for “God of Grace and God of Glory.” If it has this hymn, bring enough hymnals for each person to see.



Bible Background

¹The story of the great flood in the days of Noah begins with the terrible spread of violence in the world. The first human pair—the man and the woman—disobeyed God and had to leave the garden. Cain was the first murderer. Violence kept spreading, to such an extent that the text in Genesis 6 shows a human community in which every thought of the human heart was only evil all the time!

²This background to the flood shows human beings disobedient to the will of God and on the way to destroying God's good creation. The flood is God's way of cleansing the earth and making a fresh start. That is a quite different understanding than we have from the nonbiblical Babylonian flood story. There, the gods in heaven quarrel and cause violence to spread throughout heaven and earth. Finally, one of the gods decides to destroy all humankind out of malice, and without letting anyone on earth know until it is too late. One of the friendly gods, however, lets the Babylonian hero, Utnapishtim (often called the Babylonian Noah), know about the coming flood. Utnapishtim keeps this information secret from everyone except his immediate family. They escape the flood in his great boat.

³In the Bible, Noah is identified as a righteous person, one who does the will of God. The instructions from God to build the ark are carried out publicly, openly, it seems. According to tradition, Noah did all that he could to warn the evildoers of his day that they should repent and turn from their evil ways. But the sinners of earth only laughed at Noah for building such a massive boat on dry land!

⁴This story of the flood has its literary unevennesses, showing that there were separate traditions with differing details. According to one tradition, for example, only one pair of animals entered the ark and was saved (Genesis 6:18–22; 7:8–9). The other tradition indicates that there were seven pairs of clean animals (ritually clean, suitable for sacrifice) and one pair of unclean ones (Genesis 7:1–5). Stories about a great flood are known from many religions and traditions. They show how important the symbolism of water is for religion. Water is essential to life and a very positive reality, but it is also a reality of such massive power and danger that it can also symbolize death.

⁵Floods were common in the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers in Babylonia, but

of course the biblical flood, like the well-known Babylonian story in which Utnapishtim was the hero, was understood as a cosmic flood, one that destroyed all of life except that preserved in the ark. Like the creation stories, these flood stories are best understood as religious texts that should not be taken literally. There are, of course, groups that continue to look for the remains of Noah's ark on the mountains of Ararat.

⁶The story of the sending out of the birds and of the ark's finally coming to rest on land is memorable and gripping. The first thing that Noah and his family do when they leave the ark is worship God and make an offering of the animals and the birds that had been with them on the ark. And God declares that there will never again be a destructive flood like this one. Even though humankind does fail God and engage in violence, God will never again resort to such a step as this cosmic flood.

⁷The covenant is made not only between God and Noah and his family. Every living creature on the face of the earth is to have the assurance that God will not again bring devastation on the earth that causes all life to cease. This is a remarkable text. We note that the covenant is with all living beings, not just with human beings, and with all human beings, not just with the people of Israel. The Bible insists that God is the God of all earth's peoples and the God of all living things.

⁸The sign of the covenant is the rainbow, God's great arc in the sky, visible for all to see. This probably means that the story should be understood as a sign that God's covenant is a covenant with the natural world as well as with the world of living things. Indeed, the text says that the rainbow is a sign of God's covenant between the deity and the earth itself (Genesis 9:13).

⁹The creation stories and the flood stories belong together. According to biblical faith, God is the Creator and Preserver of all the creation. Human beings, created in God's image, share a unique responsibility with God to care for the creation, see to its needs, and keep the whole of the creation wholesome and peaceful. While the stories make clear that human beings fail God terribly by not living up to their covenant bond, God remains merciful and forgiving, ready to offer another chance, and never going back on the divine promises. Human beings can and do damage one another. They can and do damage God's creation. But God is faithful. The rainbow, often appearing just when storms are very threatening and frightening, is the testimony of God's faithfulness. Whenever we see a rainbow, it is a good thing for us to recommit ourselves to do our part in caring for and renewing God's good creation.