In the beginning

We live on a very beautiful planet in a marvellous universe. Have you ever wondered: ‘Where does this all come from? How did it all begin?’ Perhaps you have also asked: ‘Why does the world exist? Why are we here?’ What are some of the answers people give to these questions?

The Bible helps us to look back and see God beginning his plan by creating all things.

In the beginning there was God. No one else, nothing else. Only God. In the beginning God created. Out of nothing, by his Word he made matter and formed the universe. God turned his attention to one little planet — Earth. He spoke, and life came on Earth, on the land, in the sea, in the air. God created the heavens and the earth, a beautiful home, in the beginning. In the beginning God created beings like himself to live on Earth — beautiful, good beings, who could think and feel and love. God created human beings whom he could love, and who could love him and one another. He wanted them to live with him, perfect and happy for ever. This was God’s plan in the beginning.

THE STORIES OF CREATION

In the first two chapters of the Bible, God tells us about his work as the Creator. There are really two stories here:

- The first story (Genesis 1:1–2:3) tells how God made the universe and filled the earth with living things in six days.
- The second story (Genesis 2:4–24) tells us more about how God made the first man and woman, and gave them a special place in which to live.
HOW GOD CREATED HUMAN BEINGS

God had filled his beautiful earth with living creatures of many kinds: animals, birds, fish, insects, reptiles. But his plan was to have one living creature who would be superior to all others. The climax of God's creation would be an intelligent being who could know his Creator, love him, and communicate with him. God wanted a special being who could appreciate the beautiful world and take care of it as his servant.

So, from the earth's soil God formed a human body. He breathed life into that body. The first man, Adam, now began life on earth perfect in every way, just like his Maker. He was created in God's image, or likeness.

God gave Adam a beautiful garden, called 'Eden', as his home. He told Adam to look after the garden and to be in charge of all the creatures on earth.

God saw that Adam needed someone like himself as a companion and helper. While Adam was asleep, God took one of Adam's ribs and formed a woman, Eve. Adam was happy to have a special partner whom he could love, and with whom he could share God's creation.

God blessed Adam and Eve with the ability to have children, so that the earth could be populated by human beings. God's plan was that the human race should live for ever in perfect happiness, and in peace with God and with one another.
At first, the earth was just a shapeless mass of matter. Everything was completely dark. The earth was covered with water, and there was no sky. Then, in six days God formed the earth and prepared the earth for life. He also filled the earth with living creatures.

God made the sun and moon to rule over the day and night. He made the stars also.

God made the fish and other creatures to live in the sea, and birds to fly in the sky.

God made animals of every kind to live on the dry land. Finally, God made Adam and Eve.

God rested on the seventh day. This means, he had finished his work of creating. God saw that everything he had made was very good. Everything was going according to his plan.

BIBLE SEARCH
READ GENESIS 2:15-17.
What work did Adam have to do in the garden? How do you think Adam felt about his work?
Why did Adam not have to worry about his daily needs?
What did God not allow Adam to do? Why do you think God put this one limit on Adam's freedom?

THE MAIN POINTS
- The world and all living creatures did not come into existence by accident; they were created by God according to his plan.
- God showed his almighty power by creating people who could live in a happy and loving relationship with him and with one another.
- All that God created was very good.

KEY BIBLE PASSAGE  GENESIS 1:26–31
Why did God make the first people? How did God bless Adam and Eve? Give examples of how human beings are in control of the earth.
FOR US TODAY

1. We ask many questions about how and why the world began. What is the most important answer to such questions that God gives us in the Bible? What difference does it make to your life when you 'believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth'? Read Psalm 139:13–17.

2. The God who made all things is the God we worship: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From the following Bible passages, find out how each of the three persons of God was involved in the work of creation:
   - The Father: Malachi 2:10
   - The Son: John 1:1,2
     Colossians 1:15-17
   - The Holy Spirit: Genesis 1:2
     Job 33:4.

3. The story of creation tells of the many good things God planned in order to make human beings happy. Which of these good things can we still enjoy today? Can we enjoy them as much as Adam and Eve did?

WITH YOUR FAMILY

1. Perhaps there is a picture of a nature scene in your home (for example, on a calendar). Use this as a background for a family devotion.

   Read Psalm 136:1–9. Members of the family can share how they feel about the wonder and beauty of creation. Conclude with a prayer thanking God for the beautiful world he has given us.

2. Talk with your family about ways in which we can take good care of the earth.

MORE TO DO

1. Prepare posters illustrating the seven days of creation.


3. When God made the earth he saw that it was 'very good'. Share an experience you have had of the beauty of nature.

4. Volunteer to clean the grounds of the church, or to help at the home of an elderly person in the congregation.

5. Talk about some modern ideas of how life began on earth. Compare these ideas with the stories in Genesis.

WORSHIP

Read responsively from Psalm 8:

O LORD, our Lord:

Your greatness is seen in all the world!
You made man inferior only to yourself:
You crowned him with glory and honour.
You appointed him ruler over everything you made:
You placed him over all creation.

O LORD, our Lord:
Your greatness is seen in all the world!

Scripture reference: Genesis 1,2.
A child is born

It was Christmas Eve. The Sunday-school children were singing a carol as they presented the Christmas program:

'I know God loves me, In love redeems me;
I know God loves me, For he is love:
Therefore I say again, I know God loves me,
I know God loves me, For God is love.

'He sent me Jesus, My faithful Saviour,
He sent me Jesus And set me free:'

As they heard the children telling the Christmas story, all in the church seemed very happy, and gladly joined in the singing.

Why do Christians all over the world celebrate the birthday of Jesus?
What makes us so happy at this celebration?

The crucial time had come — the time for God to take the most important step in his whole saving plan. It was time for that special Person to come who would bring blessing on the whole world.

But who would this Person be, since no sinful human being could save the world? God did something truly amazing: He himself came down to earth to be born as the Saviour. The Son of God became the Son of Man.

This is the most amazing thing about God's plan. What God had in mind all the time was the secret which he revealed at the first Christmas.

CHosen

A young woman called Mary was sitting in her home in the little town of Nazareth in Galilee. She belonged to the family of King David. She was a God-fearing young woman who longed for God to send the Messiah to save his people.

Suddenly, the room was filled with dazzling light. The angel Gabriel had come to bring her a message from God: 'Peace be with you, Mary. God has greatly blessed you. He has chosen you to be the mother of a baby boy. He will be a holy child, and you will call him Jesus. He will be the Son of God. He will be the king of David's line whom God has promised. He will be great, and his kingdom will never end.'

Mary was frightened. 'How can this be?' she asked. 'I'm not even married yet.' 'The Holy Spirit will cause you to have this child, and God's power will be on you', the angel explained.

Mary was amazed that God had chosen her — someone so lowly and unimportant. But she was thankful for the grace God had shown her. 'I am the Lord's servant', she said. 'May it happen as you said.'

If Mary had kept a diary, what might she have written in the months that followed?
Today I arrived at cousin Elizabeth’s house. She is having a special baby, too. When she greeted me, I felt so happy that I sang a song of praise to God. I think I will stay here with Elizabeth for about three months . . .

Joseph came to see me today when I came back to Nazareth. An angel has told him about the baby God has given me. We are going to get married straight away. God is truly looking after me! Now I will have someone to care for me.

Soon I will have my baby. But now we have to travel all the way down to Bethlehem. The Emperor Augustus in Rome has said that we must all go to the home town of our families to enrol in the census. It will be a hard journey, but I know no harm will come to me . . .

The most wonderful thing has happened! The baby God promised was born safely last night. He is beautiful! We are here in this cattle stable because there was no room in the inn. Yet the inn-keeper was kind to us. He has let us use this warm and sheltered place. I have laid the baby in the soft hay.

What God told me about this baby is surely true! Soon after he was born, some shepherds came here. They had been looking after their sheep when angels appeared, praising God and telling them the good news that the Saviour had been born. Just imagine! My baby is Christ the Lord! The shepherds were very happy and bowed before him. It is truly amazing. This baby is God’s Son, yet he is born here in this cattle shed! . . .

It is a week now since the baby was born. Today he was circumcised, and we called him ‘Jesus’. The angel told us to call him that because he is the Saviour . . .

Another amazing thing has happened! My baby is truly the Saviour-King! This evening some strange, richly-dressed men arrived to greet the baby. They came from the east. For months they had been following a bright star which told them that the King of the Jews had been born. The star led them to our house here at Bethlehem. They worshipped the little child as their Lord and King. They gave him rich gifts: gold and precious perfume. God is looking after us. Now we have all the money we need . . .

It has been a hard day today. Joseph suddenly made us pack up and leave. Wicked King Herod wants to kill the baby! He is jealous of him because Jesus is a king, so we are going to Egypt. We will live there as long as Herod is alive. It’s strange to think that we are going to Egypt just like our forefather Jacob! I can’t help wondering where all this will finally lead . . .
JESUS GROWS UP

After Herod died, Joseph returned with Mary and Jesus to live in Nazareth. He continued his work as a carpenter. Jesus grew up with the blessing of God on him. He went to the synagogue school and studied the Old Testament. He lived quietly in Nazareth until he was about 30 years old.

ACCORDING TO PLAN

- At the right time, God carried out his plan to save the world from sin, death, and the power of the devil.
- Only God could do what had to be done. God's own Son was born as a man to be the Saviour-King.
- Jesus was true man, born of the Virgin Mary. He was true God, Son of the Father from eternity.
- After a short time in Egypt, Jesus lived in Nazareth with Mary and Joseph until the time came for God to reveal him publicly as the One whom he had sent to be the Saviour.

KEY BIBLE PASSAGE  JOHN 1:9–14

St John tells us about the central fact in the history of the world.
What is so amazing about the birth of Jesus?
Why did God send the Messiah in such a humble way?
Which people recognized the true glory of the Saviour?
WITH YOUR FAMILY

Ask members of your family which is their favourite Christmas carol, and why. Keep a list.

For a family devotion, read John 1:10–18. Read (or sing) one of the carols chosen by family members. Perhaps each person could share what Christmas means to him. As a closing prayer, use Simeon’s words in Luke 2:29–32.

MORE CHALLENGES

1. Make sure your class time-line is up to date as you mark in the birth of Christ (about 4 BC).

2. God’s plan to save the world depended on the birth of a baby — his own Son. How did God’s plans in Old Testament times sometimes depend on the birth of ‘special babies’? What was different about the birth of the Christ-child?

3. Did Jesus grow up just like any ordinary boy? Discuss this.

4. Talk to your grandparents or some elderly person about how they used to celebrate Christmas when they were children. Be ready to report to the class.

5. Just like the Israelites of old, Jesus came out of Egypt to live in Canaan, the land of promise. Read Matthew 2:14,15, and discuss why Matthew tells us this about Jesus.

GOD’S PEOPLE TODAY

1. Christ was born to be our Saviour. Each Christmas we celebrate God’s love in sending his Son to free us from sin and death.

Read Galatians 4:4.

Christ was born to be ‘the man for all nations’. Why, then, was he born a Jew?

How does Christmas show that God is for us and not against us?

2. At Christmas time, God’s people are often asked to give money to help needy people.

Discuss whether your congregation has a special collection at that time.

Why are we asked to do this at Christmas time?

WORSHIP

Sing a Christmas carol.

Read Simeon’s prayer responsively:

Now, Lord, you have kept your promise:
And you may let your servant go in peace.
With my own eyes I have seen your salvation:
Which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples;
A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles:
And bring glory to your people Israel. Amen.