

WHO AM I?

GENESIS 1-3 SEVEN GROUP STUDIES FOR
GRADUATE STUDENT WOMEN

Sally Ivaska



InterVarsity Graduate and Faculty Ministry
Women in the Academy and Professions

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Suggestions for Using the Guide

The topic for this study was suggested to me by the women of the Northwestern University Graduate Christian Fellowship. It grew out of a conversation that began with a reading of *The Gift of Being Yourself* by David Benner and a heartfelt need to discover identity in a Christian context. What better place to begin with than creation!

I am indebted to these women and three other groups---two at Marquette University-Milwaukee and one at Emory University---for field-testing the study and giving me honest feedback. Their suggestions focused primarily on issues of time management. The studies are designed for 60 minutes, but depending on the size of your group, you may find it difficult to complete them in that time-frame, especially if your discussion is lively----which I hope it will be! Because of the time issue, I have split “Who am I in relation to men?” into two parts. If you have a longer time period, you may want to do studies 3 and 4 together.

You may think that seven studies on just three chapters will be redundant and, in fact, studies 1, 3 and 4 use the same Scripture passages. However, each study has a different focus, so there is no need to exhaust the passage in just one study.

If this is the first time for you to lead a Bible discussion, you may find the following guidelines helpful.

Preparing the study

1. Pray – Ask the Holy Spirit to direct your preparation, knowing that he wants to help you discover liberating truth in God’s Word.
2. Begin a few days before your group meets to allow yourself time to meditate on what God is saying through his Word and to think of creative ways of helping others get the most from your group study.
3. Read and re-read the passage of Scripture, trying to discover its central idea. Ask yourself, “What was the author saying to his original readers and why was he saying it?” Use a Bible dictionary to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.
4. Think about how the central truth(s) applies to similar situations today and to you personally. Is there any principle or example for you to follow, a sin to avoid or confess, a command to obey, or a promise to claim? What does this passage teach you about God, yourself, or others.

5. Once you have studied for yourself, answer thoroughly all the questions in the study guide. You will find three types of questions:

- Observation – What does the passage say?
- Interpretation – What does it mean?
- Application – What does it mean for me or our group?

Make sure you don't skip the application questions. Remember that the goal of any Bible study is transformation. Your job as a Christian is to obey; your job as a leader is to move the group toward obedience.

Leading the study

1. Open with prayer or a song. This helps the group to put aside concerns of the day and center on the Lord.

2. Explain the guidelines for your small group:

- Everyone should participate in the discussion
- Nothing said in the small group meeting will be repeated outside the group; we agree to keep things confidential.

3. Ask a question that gets the group talking. The guide suggests a question you can use. This does two things: It encourages people to share information about themselves, thus building a sense of community, and it helps them to begin thinking about the Bible study topic. A second option is to ask: Has anyone encountered an "application moment" from our previous study?

4. Read aloud the passage of Scripture or ask others in the group to read. These studies were based on the New International Version of the Bible, so it will be helpful for someone to read from that translation.

5. Lead a discussion of that passage using the questions from the study guide. If a question seems confusing, rephrase it. Use your good judgment in deciding whether or not to answer all the questions. The amount of time you have for the study will determine this.

6. Encourage everyone to participate by giving opportunities for the quieter ones to speak. With some questions, in particular the first one in each study, it may be appropriate to go around the circle and have everyone share something.

7. Transition from Bible study to sharing and prayer, allowing each member to voice a request. Don't let a great Bible discussion crowd out time for this. Thank God for what he has taught you from his Word.

My prayer is that your discussions around the Word of God will transform your minds and deepen your walk with Jesus.

Enjoy!

1

Who am I in relation to God?

Genesis 1:25-31

When asked the question “*Who are you?*” most of us respond with “*I’m a student,*” or “*I’m so and so’s sister,*” or “*I’m a musician.*” In other words, we tend to think of ourselves in light of the roles we play, or what we do, or in relationship to someone else in our lives.

But who are we in relation to God? Who has he created us to be as women? That’s what we want to explore in this study.

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1. Where does your sense of self come from? To what extent has it been influenced by your abilities, appearance, achievements, race or ethnicity, parents, teachers, cultural expectations for women, what you do, how peers’ respond to you, etc?

Read Genesis 1:25-31

2. From this passage, what do we learn about how God created human beings?

3. Genesis 1:25-27 describes God creating humankind in their own image. The *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1987, p. 462) describes it like this:

“. . . man has been made like God in a way that the rest of creation has not. . . The Scriptures do not define precisely the nature of the image of God in man, and we should be careful not to single out any individual aspect or attribute of man as if it were in a special sense the ‘image.’ It is rather man in his entirety that is to be thought of as in the image of God.”

What do you think it means to be purposefully created in God’s image? (Depending on time, have each person respond to at least one of the words below.)

- Intellectually
- Physically
- Emotionally
- Morally
- Spiritually
- Socially

(Also read Psalm 8:3-9. Note that the word often translated “angels” or “heavenly beings” is the same Hebrew word---*aleim*---used for God in Genesis 1. The New American Standard translation uses “God.”)

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4. How does this truth about your identity---that you are God’s image-bearer---influence how you think and feel about
- your studies or profession?
 - your gender?
 - your body?
 - your emotions?
 - your moral choices?
 - your relationship to God?
 - your relationship to others?

(Again, you may ask each person to choose one or two of these to answer.)

5. In what area of your life is this truth most difficult to absorb or apply? Why?

6. What is it about how God created you that influenced your choice of discipline or profession?

7. (If time permits; otherwise skip to question 8) Read 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15-20. If Jesus is God's perfect image-bearer, then he is our role model. In his earthly ministry, how did Jesus model a secure identity? (For example, see John 13:1-5)

8. How has this Scripture challenged your sense of self?

9. In what areas do you need God's help to think biblically about who you are?

Spend time praying for each other, asking God to conform your thoughts about yourselves to the truth of his Word.

2

Who am I in relation to creation?

Genesis 1:26-31

Not only does the creation story in Genesis explain who we are in relation to God, but it also helps us understand our relationship to the material world and our responsibility toward our environment. In this study we will look at how God positioned his image bearers in the garden he had created.

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1. In one brief sentence, tell what comes to your mind when you hear the word “environmentalism?”

Read Genesis 1:26-31

2. In this passage, God commanded the human beings he had created to be fruitful and to rule over the earth. What is the significance of God giving these responsibilities to the woman as well as to the man?

3. Are there ways in which women are uniquely gifted to fulfill these responsibilities as part of God's plan?

4. What does it mean to be fruitful? (In addition to biological reproduction, think about references to fruitfulness in Psalm 1 and Galatians 5:22.) Consider . . .

- Intellectual fruitfulness
- Relational fruitfulness
- Spiritual fruitfulness
- Etc.

5. According to Genesis 1, the physical environment has value and is declared "good" even before human beings are created. So creation's value is not found only within its usefulness to human beings. Nor does it have value only within itself. Rather, as with human beings, creation derives its value from the Creator. In that light, what do you think God meant when he gave humans the job of "ruling" or "governing" the earth?

6. Today there is renewed commitment to being good stewards of the earth, especially in ways that are sustainable. In what areas of your life are you doing what you can to fulfill your God-given responsibility to govern well?

Does your discipline or profession contribute to this? If so, how?

7. Sometimes it is helpful to look at what is omitted in a particular passage of Scripture. What is left out in the list of what humankind is to subdue and rule over?

What is significant about that omission?

8. Imagine: What would God's original creation look like if people did not attempt to rule over each other?

9. Verse 29 tells us that God provided sustenance for the man and woman so that they were able to do the job he had given them to do. How have you seen God provide for you recently?

10. In her book *Half the Church*, Caolyn Custis James writes, "The starting place of every daughter is to [make] God our study . . . with a keen eye to take in every detail, we are to focus on who he is, see the world through his eyes, love what he loves, grieve what he hates, and join his cause." (page 59)

How much time are you devoting to "seeing the world through God's eyes," especially his created world? What will it look like for you to make this a priority?

Summary

Today we have looked at several biblical perspectives of God's mandate for us to care for his creation. We have considered

- what may be women's unique contribution for caring for the environment
- what fruitfulness means for the Christian
- how our work may bring glory to the awesomeness of God's creation
- what governing well might look like in our profession
- why we are not commanded to rule over each other
- how God provides for the mandate he has given us
- how we can focus more on the Creator in all we do.

Which of these areas has been especially challenging or instructive for you?

Spend some time thanking God for his creation, especially the parts that mean the most to you.

3

Who am I in relation to men? (Part 1)

Genesis 1:27-31, 2:18-25

Before we begin today's study, does anyone have an "application moment" from the first two studies (Who am I in relation to God? and "Who am I in relation to creation?") that she would like to share with the group?

In the first study, we looked at our identity in relation to God (vertical). This study and study #4 examine our relationship to men (horizontal) as God intended it to be from creation.

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1. How would you describe your relationship to men? Which of these words would you use? *Submissive, equals, partners, dominant, complementary, adversarial, competitive, conciliatory, inferior to, superior to, other?*

Read Genesis 1:27-31 and 2:18-25

2. In these two descriptions of God creating human beings, what do the man and woman have in common?

3. What is the significance of male and female having been
- created by God in his image?
 - consisting of the same substance?
 - given equal dominion over creation and equal resources/provision?
 - declared by God to be very good?
 - blessed by God?
 - transparent with each other and with God?
-

4. Where/when have you seen men and women demonstrating this type of relationship?

5. What does it take to develop that kind of relationship?

6. In spite of all that the man and woman have in common, they remain distinct beings. What is *different* about how Adam and Eve were created?

7. In the second account of the creation of man, what is the one thing that God declares to be “not good?”

How does God bring Adam to this realization?

8. Not one of the animals God created was suitable to be Adam's companion (from the Latin, *companionem*---one with whom you break bread). In what situations in your own life does your need for companionship become apparent?

9. What opportunities exist for you for healthy companionship with men?

Consider the issues this study has brought up for you. Is there something you're grateful for? Anything you need to repent of? Anything you need to ask God for? Take some time to pray for each other.

4

Who am I in relation to men? (Part 2)

Genesis 2:18-25

In our last study we began looking at what the creation story has to say about our relationship to men. Before beginning this week's discussion, let's review what we talked about last week:

- Men and women have a lot in common (see question #2)
- God created them as distinct beings
- We all need human companionship.

Now let's look in greater detail about how and why God created the woman.

Read Genesis 2:18-25

1. According to verse 20, Adam lacks a "suitable helper" for him (*ezer kenegdo* in Hebrew). In order to understand who God created woman to be in relation to man, we need to take a closer look at these two Hebrew words.

- *Kenegdo* = suitable.

What is it about how God created Eve that makes her suitable for Adam?

2. Now let's look at the word *ezer*.

- *Ezer* = strong helper

In addition to the creation passages, the word *ezer* appears 19 times in the Old Testament. Divide the following passages among yourselves and read aloud: Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26 & 29; Psalms 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19 (translated "strength" in the NIV); 115:9-11; 121:1-2; 124:8; 146:5; Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14; Daniel 11:34; Hosea 13:9.

What characterizes a "helper" or "help" in these verses?

In most cases, who is the *ezer*?

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture (the Septuagint), the word *boethos* is used for *ezer*. *Boethos* is used only once in the New Testament (Hebrews 13:6) where it describes God as a "helper."

How does this shape your understanding of who Eve was created to be in relationship to Adam?

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3. In what ways do you function as an *ezer* in the classroom, at your place of work, at church, in your home, in your Christian fellowship?
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4. In what ways are you as a woman---an *ezer*---equipped to help men see this aspect of God's image in you?
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5. Only at the very end of the creation narrative does God introduce the idea of marriage (verses 23-24). Being an image bearer and an *ezer* is not contingent on a woman being married; rather, this is who God made her to be at creation—it's who she is as a daughter of God.

How could the role of ezer be fleshed out in the context of the marriage relationship? (Keep in mind the characteristics of a “helper.”)

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6. Among other things, marriage is a picture of the unity God intended for the relationship between man and woman (“and they will become one flesh”). In John 17:20-23 Jesus also speaks about unity, this time among those men and women who will choose to follow him.

How could unity between men and women---true partnership---serve to usher in the kingdom of God?

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7. In what practical ways can you contribute to God’s intended unity between men and women, whether in a marriage relationship or in the body of Christ?

-
8. Are there any attitudes about yourself and your relationship to men that need changing as a result of this study?

Ask the Holy Spirit to align your attitudes with God the Creator’s. Then think about the men in your lives (fathers, brothers, husbands, friends, colleagues, professors, etc.). Spend some time praying to be godly *ezers* for them.

“Like the man, she [the ezer] is also God’s creative masterpiece---a work of genius and a marvel to behold---for she is fearfully and wonderfully made. The ezer never sheds her image bearer identity . . . The kind of help the man needs demands full deployment of her strength, her gifts, and the best she has to offer. His life will change for the better because of what she contributes to his life. Together they will daily prove in countless and surprising ways that two are always better than one.”

Half the Church, Carolyn Custis James, p. 114-115

5

Who am I in relation to work?

Genesis 1:27-2:20

The theology of work is not talked about much in the church today, and yet work is what we spend most of our waking hours doing. Is all work God-ordained? What did he intend from the very beginning? Let's look once again at the creation story to help us answer these questions.

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1. Choose one of the following questions to answer:
 - What do you think of when you hear the word “work?”
 - What concept of “work” did you grow up with?
 - What about your work/studies do you feel good about and why?

Read Genesis 1:31-2:2 – *God works*

2. How do these verses describe what God has been doing in chapter 1? What was the nature of his work?
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3. Based on God's example, how would you define “work?” How does this compare with our culture's rather narrow definition? (E.g. If you are a student, or if you stay home and raise children, you are considered to be “not working.”)

4. What aspects of your work reflect God's work in creation? (E.g. Is it creative? Does it bring order out of chaos? Does it contribute to providing for what already exists?)

5. God looked at all he had made and declared it "very good." By what criteria do you declare your work "good?"

6. When and how do you take time to savor your work?

7. What does God's decision to rest on the 7th day contribute to your understanding of work?

(Note: The Hebrew word *qadosh* is translated "holy" and could give the impression that rest is holy and that work, in contrast, is unholy. A better translation of *qadosh* is "set apart for a special purpose.")

8. What does it mean when it says "God had finished the work" (vs. 2)? In what way was it finished? In what way was it not finished? (see John 5:17; 19:30, Colossians 1:16-17, Psalm 104:10-30)

9. Exodus 20:8-11 tells us that we are to rest from our work one day a week, just as God did. What makes it hard for you to do that?

10. How do you and your work benefit from a Sabbath rest?

Read Genesis 1:27-28; 2:15-20 – *God created people to work*

11. In Study One, we looked at what it means to be created in God's image. One aspect of God's being is that he is a creative worker.

How does being made in God's image influence how and why you work?

12. To whom does God give the job of stewarding or governing his creation? Note that this partnership involves both genders. How does that influence how you think about your role as a woman in relation to work?

13. How does knowing that God works affect your attitude toward work?

14. Is there something about the way you view work or do your work that you want to change?

Spend time praying about your attitudes toward your work and toward God's command to keep the Sabbath. Share with one another some practical ways of resting from work.

6

Who am I as a result of the fall?

Genesis 3

Before we begin today's study, does anyone have an "application moment" from the last two topics (Who am I in relation to men? and "Who am I in relation to work?") that she would like to share with the group?

Up until Genesis 3, things in the garden of Eden are good. The man and woman enjoy fellowship with God who created them in his own image, harmony with one another, and meaningful work to do as they cultivate the garden God created.

But in Genesis 3 things fall apart: Eve is deceived and gives in to temptation; Adam follows and their sin impacts all of the relationships that had up to now been harmonious. "Sinner" becomes part of the woman's identity. In this final study we'll look at how Eve's disobedience impacts for all time women's relationship to God, creation, work, and men.

Read Genesis 3:1-6

1. What prompts Eve to abandon her roles as image bearer and Adam's ezer (strong helper)?

2. What is it that tempts you to alter or disbelieve what God has said, or doubt God's intentions toward you?

Read Genesis 3:7-24

3. What are the results of Eve's disobedience, in her relationship
 - to God?
 - to the man?
 - to creation?
 - to work?

-
4. Where do you see evidence of this brokenness
 - in the university world?
 - in the church?
 - in families?

(E.g., shame before God and others; "liberation" from God; the urge to hide who you really are; blame, self-justification and antagonism; men "ruling over" women; hard and painful labor)

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5. In what areas of your own life do you long to see this brokenness repaired?

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6. How is expulsion from the garden both judgment and mercy? In what other ways do you see God's mercy at work (vs. 15, 21, 22-23)?

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7. Where have you seen evidence of his mercy in your own life?

8. Though God metes out judgment in Genesis 3, he also sows seeds of redemption. What role will the woman play in God's redemptive plan? (See Genesis 3:15, Matthew 1:20-21, Luke 1:26-33, Hebrews 2:14-15)

Though the fall had disastrous consequences for both the man and woman, God's plan to bring redemption by becoming a human being, and Mary's total submission to his will for her, give us hope. We will explore that hope in Study 7.

Spend some time praying for each other, acknowledging your brokenness and thanking God for his mercy in the midst of that.

7

Who am I because of redemption?

Selected passages from the New Testament

Before looking at various passages of Scripture that talk about redemption, let's review the consequences of the fall by reading Genesis 3:7-24 and once again answering Question 3 of Study 6.

As a result of the woman's sin, God declared a far-reaching and all-encompassing curse. The resulting separation from God negatively impacted all of our relationships. But as we'll see today, God's promise of redemption---a new covenant--- extends beyond the fall, effectively "reversing the curse."

Read Colossians 1:13-15, 19-22 and Ephesians 1:3-12

1. What do these verses say about our new identity in Christ?

How does Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection "reverse the curse" on our relationship to God?

Read Romans 8:18-23

2. How does Paul characterize the present and future creation?

How is our ultimate redemption as children of God bound up with that of creation?

At times we may feel that our efforts to steward God's creation are futile. Won't it all be destroyed in the end? Paul says quite the contrary. In the words of John Stott,

"The universe is not going to be destroyed, but rather liberated, transformed and suffused with the glory of God." (*Romans*, p. 241)

In what ways might this truth affect how you think about environmental issues?

Read Ephesians 2:4-10, Colossians 3:23-24

3. In Study 5 we looked at how God created us with the ability and mandate to work. According to these passages, even though we still battle with the "thorns and thistles" brought on by the fall, there is renewed purpose. Based on having become new creations in Christ, what should be our relationship to and attitude toward work?

In your day to day studies/work, how does this perspective help you to "do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him?" (Colossians 3:17)

Read Ephesians 4:1-3, 5:21 and Galatians 3:26-28

4. According to these Scriptures, how do Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection "reverse the curse" on our relationship to men?

Jesus came to tear down the walls that divide us---walls that exist because of sin. Consider what a radical concept this was to devout, first-century Jewish men who began each day with the following prayer:

*Blessed be He who did not make me a Gentile;
Blessed be He who did not make me a woman;
Blessed be He who did not make me a slave.*

What positive relationships between men and women have you seen in those who have been redeemed by Christ?

5. Which aspect of God's redemptive work (renewal of your relationship to God, creation, work or men) do you need to experience most at this time in your life?

6. In which aspect have you seen God's redemptive work recently?

Take time to pray for one another's relationships. Ask God to redeem your identity as he draws you to himself. Thank him for what he has taught you through the study of his Word.