



## STUDY 1

# GOD GETS STARTED

## GENESIS 1:1—2:3

*Alison Siewert and Daniel Jones*

**PURPOSE:** This study will help us see how God sets the stage for artistic and dramatic expression.

One of the scariest things about being an artist is that you have to actually start the art. To go from blank to concept to image to the fullness of expression is daunting. Imagine God's canvas: endless nothingness. That is how God starts his project. Even with nothingness as a starting point, God is able to create something really good. It is good because it expresses who God is, and because it expresses it not just to emptiness but to creatures made to be like God himself. God makes the whole creation and puts people at its zenith. Then he gives it away! God gives away his art.

In the midst of pressure not only to get to rehearsals and meetings but also to find time to actually be creative, it helps to stop and look at God as a creator. To pause and consider God's courage, his thoughtfulness, his intelligence, his ability to make beauty that defines beauty—this is a discipline that will serve us as we engage in the artistic process together.

### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What part of the creative process do you enjoy most?
- ◆ What part of the process scares you?

### BACKGROUND

The Hebrews lived among many other tribes, all of which had their own creation stories, often detailing convoluted squads of deities running the universe through greed, force and

selfishness. Many created entities were thought to have been made through conflict—for example, one god cutting another in half to form the skywaters and the groundwaters. The stars were thought to be communication from the gods about human fate—which was inescapable—and humans were regarded as less than real, only phantoms. People were created to serve the gods “that they might be at ease.”

Genesis is the statement by God's people, in the midst of those cultures, of the meaning of human existence, the order of the universe and the character of God. We are going to look at the first of the two creation accounts in Genesis, the more structured and formal of the two. It was part of an oral tradition before it was written down.

### FOR STUDY

- ◆ Have one person read Genesis 1:1—2:3 out loud. Pause, and have another person read it again. What words, phrases or images jump out at you?
- ◆ Consider what it might have been like for the Hebrews to hear this story in the context of their life among the nations. What might have been notable or outstanding?
- ◆ How is this account put together? (How does it move along?)
- ◆ What do you appreciate about God in this text?
- ◆ Verse 27 says that God made humans in his image. From the text so far, what do you think that means?
- ◆ What does this passage tell you about God as Creator? Artist?



**FOR LIFE**

- ◆ If you were going to stage this story theatrically, how would you do it? Assuming no limits on budget, time or talent, brainstorm how this would go.
- ◆ This account was written during a time when Israel lived among many other stories. What models does it suggest to us for sharing our story in the midst of our culture's many stories?
- ◆ We mentioned that God takes courage to create—he is not stopped by the barrenness or darkness as he begins. What do you need courage to do as a creator? Ask God for this courage.

**STUDY 2**

# YOUR NAME IN LIGHTS

## GENESIS 11:1-9

***Daniel Jones and Alison Siewert***

**PURPOSE:** This study will help us think about the temptation to provide for ourselves rather than letting God provide for us.

The first time I (Daniel) studied the account of the Tower of Babel with a group of artists, my heart pounded and I clenched with conviction. I have been a tower builder: methodically considering how I can make a name for myself and reach the heavens—not through or with God, but by my ability and desire to be known. Something in me wants to be defined not by my dependence on God (as his creature) but by my independent ability to make my life. I yearn for external things (looks, talent, achievement, money) to build me up when I know—in my head—that I need God to build me, not from external stuff but from the inside out.

Coming out of the study, I thought, *How often do actors and others use the art they love to build themselves up, get the pat on the back, and become well-known and wealthy?* Pretty often. In our culture, name recognition and exposure are big. Even in Christian contexts, where I and others can claim, “I’m doing it for the Lord and he just keeps opening those

doors,” I have to wonder, *Is that really true? Am I really in it for God—or am I attracted to making a name for myself?*

### **INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS**

- ◆ When you look at famous people, especially dramatic artists, what is most appealing about their fame?
- ◆ Have you ever been drawn to being famous? Or have you ever been famous? What did you hope for? How did it turn out?

### **BACKGROUND**

The Tower of Babel story shows up after Genesis has laid out the “table of nations” (chapter 10), the list of seventy nations on the earth after the flood. Everyone could communicate because there was only one language, and people were all clumped together in one general area, what is now the southern Tigris/Euphrates plain. They decided to make a tower, probably a *ziggurat*—a four-sided staircase with a room at the top (bed and food included) where the gods could stop by for a rest. *Ziggurats* were filled with rubble; it was all about the stairs.

The towers were built using burned bricks and tar (for mortar) and were neither solid nor long lasting.

### FOR STUDY

Have three people read the story aloud: one as the narrator, one as the Babylonians and one as God. Have fun telling the story. (If you're having snacks while you do this, feel free to employ cheese puffs or something as a building material and try it out . . .)

- ◆ What do you imagine it was like for everyone to have “one language and few words”? (What might the dynamics of that society have been?)
- ◆ Why do the Babylonians want to build, and what are they trying to avoid?
- ◆ How does God respond? (Is he actually scared, or does that inference seem rhetorical?)
- ◆ What's the effect of God's response?
- ◆ Contrast how the tower builders were defined at the beginning of the story with how they are defined now.

### FOR LIFE

- ◆ The Babylonians' tower—what they create (their art)—represents their spiritual reality. What does your creation look like? In other words, how would you like for people to see and define you? Create a collage or picture to illustrate your tower when you're making a name for yourself. Next to that one, make another “tower” out of God's names for you.
- ◆ Why does God divide people from one another? What is the effect of our separation from one another—and how does God use that for our good?
- ◆ How can you get down off the tower-building project? Where will you go from here? Pray together.
- ◆ Find someone who has struggled with letting go of making his or her own name, in whom you can see God has worked to make *his* name. Talk with this individual about this passage and about how you might resist tower building and instead choose the humility of creaturehood.

## STUDY 3

# I WANT WHAT THEY GOT

## PSALM 73

***Daniel Jones***

**PURPOSE:** In this study we'll consider some of the temptations to compare and covet that can beleaguer us as performers.

Even though we can shrug off Hollywood as bogus, in the backs of our minds we know that our drama gets compared to the standards set by movies and TV. Actually, we don't even need Hollywood to make us feel bad; most of us compare ourselves to each other, to the other (better) actor, to other churches—we

can always find some comparative standard.

We can become acutely aware of others' abundance and our own lack when we see well-produced theater and wonder what it would be like to have all that space, time, money, attention and education, plus all those amazing pros who know what they're doing . . . And here we are, rehearsing in the third-grade Sunday school room. Or perhaps we see people around us who fit the good images of our

culture—thin, fit, beautiful, young and so on—and wallow in our shortcomings.

It's a simple thing to covet what we perceive others have; it's a more difficult discipline to trust that what God is giving us is exactly what we need.

### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is one thing you truly love about yourself?
- ◆ By what standard do you evaluate yourself? It could be another person, a different life path or even your picture of yourself as you “should be.”

### BACKGROUND

Psalm 73 is addressed to the people of God assembled in worship. Asaph, the founder of one of the main musicians' guilds among the Levites, is the presenter.

### FOR STUDY

- ◆ Listen to the psalm, then go back and study quietly for a few minutes. From the text, what can we understand about the community's situation? (What surrounds them? What might they be experiencing?)

- ◆ Review the list of characteristics of the wicked. What can you identify in our own culture?
- ◆ Which indignity or struggle seems the worst to you?
- ◆ Describe the wrestling process of the psalmist: How does he go back and forth and finally let God win?
- ◆ When God does win, what does that look like?
- ◆ How does it change things for the psalmist?

### FOR LIFE

- ◆ How have you “come close to stumbling” as you've envied the arrogant and seen the prosperity of the wicked?
- ◆ What is the psalmist's remedy for envy?
- ◆ How does the psalmist call us to continually combat the temptation to covet and compare?
- ◆ How have you seen God bring true abundance to your life? your art? your team? And how could you work together as a team to focus on God's gifts to you? Think of some specific disciplines you could do together.
- ◆ Create a psalm of your own about the ways God is at work in your life; share them at the end of your study or the next time you meet.

## STUDY 4

# DR. JESUS

## LUKE 5:29-32

***Alison Siewert***

**PURPOSE:** In this study we'll seek to identify how God works through our weaknesses to bless others and heal us.

Healing is all over the Gospels: lepers, blind guys, bent-over women, the lame, the

deaf and the bleeding all find their way to Jesus. The Gospel writers certainly had something in mind when they included those stories in theirs. They had seen lots of people healed by Jesus—they experienced him as the

Great Physician. How does Jesus the doctor show up in our lives?

One challenge for drama teams is that we are often portraying broken, hurting people, but many of us have been taught to keep our game faces on, to look for the good in every situation and to keep our struggles to ourselves. Admitting our weakness, frailty and pain is part of letting Jesus in and allowing him to shape our innermost being. It's also part of becoming effective actors and communicators, because it is our own brokenness that informs our ability to portray true characters.

### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the sickest you've ever been, and how did your doctor treat you?
- ◆ What do you like least about going to the doctor?
- ◆ When has someone else's difficult experience, illness or struggle informed or encouraged you?

### BACKGROUND

At the outset of Luke 5:29-32, Jesus has just called Levi to follow him, and Levi turns around and throws a huge party for Jesus at his house. As a tax collector, Levi had betrayed his own people by extracting Jewish money for the occupying Roman government. Tax collectors had to collect their own salaries: In effect, they provided for themselves by adding extra amounts to the legal taxes. Many tax collectors became very wealthy, essentially by stealing from fellow citizens.

Jesus is, then, at a party at Levi's with Levi's friends—mostly other tax collectors and their crowd—a patently unpopular, irreligious crew. The Pharisees are zealous and legalistic; they wanted to see Israel return to God by keeping the law. To them, Jesus' presence at a dinner of tax collectors is scandalous, distasteful and leaves him discredited. But Jesus apparently carries enough weight to make them attempt to engage him in dialogue over the in-

cident, rather than ignoring him altogether.

### FOR STUDY

- ◆ Read the story out loud. Then take turns relating it in your own words from the perspective of various people in the room: Jesus, the Pharisees, Levi and the other guests at dinner. What stands out? Surprises you? Delights you?
- ◆ This conversation takes place in front of a crowd, and it's likely politically charged. What questions beneath the questions do you hear?
- ◆ Who is well and who is sick?
- ◆ What response is Jesus hoping for?
- ◆ What response does Jesus get? (Keep reading to discover this.)
- ◆ If you were in the room, how do you think you would have responded?
- ◆ What are the implications of Jesus' being a doctor?
- ◆ What are the implications of being a patient?

### FOR LIFE

- ◆ No one likes to be sick. Some of us avoid even admitting when we're sick. Why?
- ◆ It's great to get diagnosed, but being diagnosed means becoming aware of our weaknesses. How might your awareness of weakness help you as an artist?
- ◆ How can you work with your weaknesses to connect with characters you're playing? What challenges might you encounter as you try to do that?
- ◆ One thing teams can do for each other is pray. Not just quick, chirpy prayers but deep, healing prayers. Spend some time sharing with one another about your brokenness and weaknesses, one at a time. Then lay hands on each person who has shared (a sign of God's blessing) and pray for healing. Appeal to Jesus the Great Physician. (You might need to do this in smaller groups or over several weeks. And if you run into something too overwhelming for your

- team, confidentially, and with the person's permission, seek a pastor or counselor for help.)
- ◆ Once you've done some sharing and pray-

ing together, talk about how you can help each other to be vulnerable, to allow the broken places to show as you portray broken people onstage.

## STUDY 5

# MAKING GOD'S NAME KNOWN

## ACTS 17:16-34

*Alison Siewert*

**PURPOSE:** In this study we'll explore how we communicate the gospel in terms our culture can understand and pursue.

Paul visited Athens after a close call in Thessalonica and then Berea. Some believers brought Paul to Athens, where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. While he was there he took note of the city's idols and also its sincere yearning for a God they did not know. This passage has been studied a great deal as a model for contextualizing the gospel—making the message connect with people in ways they understand.

Making the gospel connect with people in ways they understand is what we're trying to do with drama. One of our main goals is to refresh things people have heard a million times and to introduce things they've never heard—all in a way they can comprehend and even enjoy.

### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- ◆ How did you first hear the gospel? Did it make sense? Why or why not?
- ◆ What's the best way you've ever heard the gospel preached? The worst?

### BACKGROUND

Athens was a major crossroads and center of culture, and, as the text says, was full of idols. Paul usually went to the synagogue first wherever he was, to bring the gospel to the Jews before going to the Gentiles. Epicureans were committed to hedonism and were famous for their feasts, at which people ate until they threw up, then came back for more. To them God was irrelevant. Stoics were nearly the opposite, holding altruism and self-sacrifice as their standards; they believed the universe dissolved back into God but had no active faith.

The Areopagus was a council, the center for debate and discussion—an intellectual gathering place. Paul was invited to talk there about his “new teachings” about “strange deities.” Look carefully at the way Paul explains the faith in their terms.

### FOR STUDY

- ◆ Break the passage up and read it aloud. You can take parts if you like. As you listen, what themes seem to wind through the whole story?
- ◆ How does Paul regard the city? And how do

the people of the city regard him? (Note: “Idle babblers” means, literally, “seed picker,” or perhaps “birdbrain.”)

- ◆ How does Paul connect with the crowd at the Areopagus?
- ◆ How does he connect the Athenians’ story with the gospel story?
- ◆ How does art figure in?
- ◆ If you were going to create a sketch for Athens, what elements would you include?

#### **FOR LIFE**

- ◆ If you were walking through your town or campus, what artistic expressions or sym-

bols could you identify that express people’s longing for, but lack of knowledge of, God?

- ◆ How could you incorporate one or more of those expressions or symbols into a sketch? Consider writing something.
- ◆ If you were trying to lay out the gospel in a culturally contextualized way, something akin to Paul’s preaching here, how would you do it? (What media would you use? What would be the important characteristics of the work?)
- ◆ How does this passage encourage you to continue building artistic communication in your community?