

LESSON ONE
*The Mission's
Beginning*

FOCAL TEXTS

Genesis 1:1;
Isaiah 46:5–9; Acts 17:24–31

BACKGROUND

Genesis 1:1;
Isaiah 44:6–28; 46:1–13;
Acts 17:22–31

MAIN IDEA

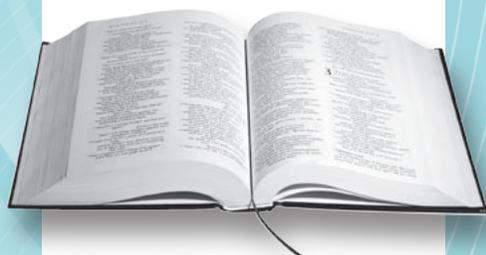
God's mission begins from the foundation that God's dominion is unlimited.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How big is your God?

TEACHING AIM

To lead the class to suggest implications and actions that should follow from the biblical truth of God's unlimited dominion



UNIT ONE
**Foundational Truths
About God's Mission**

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The passages examined in this lesson focus on the teaching that there is one and only one God. This concept may seem elementary. However, people who lived two to three thousand years ago believed in many gods. For them, no single god could encompass dominion over everything. Israel's eventual understanding of monotheism developed over several centuries.

Israel came to view YHWH¹ as an active agent in the affairs of daily life. The other gods were passive and immobile, unable to effect any change. The prophet of the exile (Isaiah 44:6–28; 46:1–13) argued that the imperial gods of Babylon offered no future. Only the Lord held dominion over the affairs of humanity.

The acknowledgement that YHWH is the only deity provides the foundation for the mission of Israel and the church. Isaiah 44 proclaims that YHWH is King, Redeemer, and Warrior. “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god” (Isa. 44:6). As the only God, YHWH rules over all empires and kings. The kings of the earth serve YHWH, whether or not they realize their servitude (Isa. 44:24–28). Isaiah used the example of the Persian king, Cyrus, whom YHWH utilized to free the Israelites from Babylonian captivity. Cyrus set the captives free and provided aid for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. Yet, the pagan king did not realize that it was YHWH who had led him to the victories that allowed Israel to return home.

The Lord's dominion extends over creation and everything within the universe. The implications of this sovereignty for Israel and the early church were enormous.

Interpreting the Scriptures

God's Dominion from the Beginning (Genesis 1:1)

The first verse in the Scriptures has several possible translations into English. The translation with which most people are familiar is “In the

beginning God created. . . .” However, the Hebrew text is rich with possibilities, such as, *By way of beginning, God created . . .*, or *In the beginning when God created. . .* Each possible translation conveys powerful imagery of God’s dominion over the known and unknown universe. Genesis 1 proclaims that God is not confined to the temporal realm of our universe because, before our universe existed, God *was* and *is*. Implied in Genesis 1:1 is the belief that there was never a time in which God did not exist.

Even the generic title for God (*elohim* or *Elohim*) in Genesis 1:1 is important. Unlike the personal name of God (*Yahweh* or *YHWH*) found throughout the Old Testament (more than 6,800 times), Genesis 1:1 refers to God by the use of the Hebrew plural (*el* or *El*). The plural is not a reference to the Trinity, but a possible allusion to the majestic nature of the God of the Hebrews. By referring to the deity as *Elohim*, the ancient Israelites ascribed to their God all the power, authority, and majesty assigned to the gods of their neighbors, who believed that no single god could do and be everything. The God of Israel had no comparable limitations.

The expression “God created” (Hebrew *ba-ra*) is significant. Verse 1 announces God’s creative (*ba-ra*) involvement with the heavens and the earth—which covers everything. Verse 21 states the deity “created” (*ba-ra*) the “great sea monsters,” all marine life, and all fowl. Verse 27 announces that God “created” (*ba-ra*) humanity. The word translated “created” (*ba-ra*) is used exclusively in the Old Testament to denote divine action, especially in creation.² The biblical text makes a distinction between God’s creative work and the secondary products made by humanity. People can only *use* what God has already *created*.

God’s creation and actions as described in Genesis 1:1—2:4a present a world ruled by space and time that humans inhabit. The world as created by God was meant to be a living space for humankind. The world as presented in Genesis 1 is the world of space and time where people live out their lives.³

A Contrast of gods (Isaiah 46:5–9)

46:5. The prophet continued the negative critique of idols that began in verses 1–2. Verse 5 uses the incomparability formula as found in Isaiah 40:18—“To whom then will you liken God.” The speeches in Isaiah 41:2, 4, and 26 use the “who” question to raise a similar point.

46:6. The passage quickly moves away from the incomparability of God to mockery of other gods, especially the gods of Babylon. The prophet continues the parody on idol worship presented in Isaiah 44:9–20. The manufactured gods of the Near East were pathetic and powerless. The people took what had value to them (gold and silver) and fashioned gods from it. The goldsmith, like the ironsmith (44:12) or carpenter (44:15), fashioned an idol from the valuable products. Isaiah 44:12–13 describes the care the artisan used to produce a lovely object. Both passages, 44:15–17 and 46:6, tell of how the people quickly worshiped the work of their hands.

46:7. The gods made by the people's imaginations are weak and must be carried from place to place. Such gods have no inherent power and do not have any say in where they will find a place of rest. When the gods do arrive at a resting place, the people must erect the image and prevent it from falling down. The prophet reminded the reader that the image could not move from its position. Isaiah 44:17 describes the worshiper as calling out to this god made by human hands, "Save me, for you are my god!" The prophet called those who worship such images "deluded" (44:20). The idols must be lifted and carried about. They cannot save. The God of Israel by contrast is the God who lifts up the people, carries them, and saves (46:4). The message of the prophet in the context of the passage is that the gods of Babylon will not be able to save the city from its enemies (Persia) because YHWH is raising up a new ruler (Cyrus). Why would Israel think that their handmade idols were any more powerful?

46:8. The prophet reminded the reader that God has a long and proven track record in contrast to the recently fabricated gods with no record or history of efficaciousness. God challenged (an imperative, "remember") the people to recall the saving works from the past. Israel was not to forget the past for the sake of newness. The people were addressed as "you transgressors," although no specific transgression is mentioned. The Babylonian Exile provides the background for the passage and may refer to Israel's weakness for Babylonian seductions. However, the prophet proclaimed that God still cares about the well-being of Israel, even as sinners.

46:9. The Lord's availability to Israel depended on a living tradition that remembered the past. To forget the past for the sake of new gods was to miss out on the present encounter with the living God. The new generation of Israelites born in captivity would miss the relationship with the unique, living God if they, or their family, did not "remember."

The Unknown God Made Known (Acts 17:24–31)

Religion played a significant role in the lives of the ancient Greeks. The Greeks believed in a vast array of gods who influenced every aspect of life. Theatrical performances in ancient Greece were associated with religious festivals and began with a sacrifice to the patron god of the theater. Athens was the heart and soul of Greek culture. Even the Romans imitated Greek art and architecture, and borrowed the Greek gods.

When the Apostle Paul visited Athens, he found a modern city with culture, commerce, prosperity, and religious beliefs. He took the opportunity to preach about Jesus in the synagogue and in the *agora* (the marketplace, the center of activity for the city). When Paul aroused the curiosity of the Athenians concerning the Christian message, they invited him to the Areopagus to continue the discussion of his religious beliefs. The Areopagus had been the setting for the trial of Socrates (470–399 B.C.), and Luke's reference may imply this invitation for Paul to appear at the Areopagus was for ulterior motives. The Greeks were so religious that they even had an altar to an unknown god in case they had omitted a deity from the pantheon of gods.

Paul based his message in part on the theology found in Genesis 1 and Isaiah 46. He informed the Athenians that the unknown god whom they worshiped was the same God who created the heavens and the earth (Acts 17:24). The one, true God has no need for human assistance either in building God's house or in daily service.

17:22. Paul expressed his positive impression of the city of Athens, especially the religious life of the Athenians. The Apostle spoke of the superstition of the inhabitants.

17:23. Other ancient authors make reference to altars to an "unknown god" in Athens. Paul sought to make known this "unknown god" to the

citizens of the city. Paul underscored their ignorance in worshiping this “unknown god.”

17:24. Paul informed the audience about the true God. The Lord created the universe and has dominion over the heavens and earth. No building or temple constructed by human hands is the abode of the Lord.

17:25. The phrase “nor is he served by human hands” is similar to the expressions found in Isaiah 44 and 46 where the gods relied on human craftsmanship and needed humans to transport them from place to place. Paul argued that the one true God does not need human assistance since God is the One who gives life to all mortals.

17:26–27. Paul related all humanity to a common ancestor. He argued that there is a common brotherhood and sisterhood of every human being.

17:29. This verse, as 17:25, reminds us of Isaiah 44; 46.

17:30–31. Paul began his sermon by emphasizing that God is the Creator of everything. He ended with the statement that God is the Judge of everything.

Focusing on the Meaning

Through our many years of marriage, my wife and I have played the *what if* game. *If you could live anywhere, then where would you want to live? If you could go anywhere in the world, then where would you want to go on vacation?* We are all limited by income, family, health, and other matters. However, the passages examined indicate that God does not have any limitations. God’s mission for the world begins with the realization that God’s dominion is unlimited.

If God were to give you a blank check for ministry toward others in the world, how would you spend it? How you would spend this windfall from God will say much about you.

We worship what is valuable to us. We give our attention to those people and objects in our lives that matter the most. Yet, how would our

behavior change if we had it all? Would we be willing to share from the abundance of our wealth for the benefit of others?

We honor those in our lives whom we see as powerful. If the president of the United States were to ask you to serve on a special task force or to participate in an important program, you would probably give serious consideration to the invitation. Why? The president is the most powerful political figure in the world. The biblical writers claim that the Lord is the most powerful figure in the universe and the Lord has asked you to serve on a special task force. Would your answer be any different from your answer to the president?

Do we give more honor and respect to the products of our creative imagination than we give to the Creator of all that we have at our disposal? We care for our houses, cars, hobbies, and the objects that surround our daily lives. Yet, if God truly has dominion, should we not also show the same care to what is important to God as we do to what is important to us?

How big is your God? Your response to God's mission determines whether your God is large or small.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Display a globe in a prominent place in the room. Ask class members to respond aloud to the following questions: *What did it take to create this globe? Who made it? What materials were used? How long will it be useful? How long will it last?* Then ask class members to consider the same questions once more, this time in regard to what the globe represents—the world we live in.
2. To introduce the study as a whole, summarize (or enlist someone in advance to do so) “Introducing *Participating in God's Mission*” in

the *Study Guide*. Encourage the class to think not only of what they can learn but also of what they can begin to do during this study.

3. Comment that today we begin a four-week study of some of the foundational elements of God's mission and our role in it, beginning with the biblical truth of God's unlimited dominion and our proper response of worshiping God alone. To further introduce the unit, "Foundational Truths About God's Mission," call attention to a previously prepared wall poster containing this quote, "Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God."⁴ Allow time for discussion and response.

Guide Bible Study

4. Invite a few children to visit your class to sing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." (Or lead the class to sing it themselves.) After the children leave, lead class members to brainstorm additional hymn titles and songs that declare God's greatness. (Possible songs could include "How Great Thou Art," "My God Is So Big," "Great Is the Lord," "How Great Is Our God.")
5. Write the words "Good News" at the top of one end of a markerboard. Point out that if our mission is to be rooted in God's mission, then to get our actions right we must start with our God whose rule is unlimited. Invite previously enlisted class members to read the following passages about God's greatness in creation: Genesis 1:1; Exodus 9:29; Deuteronomy 4:32–39; Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 8:1–2; Psalm 19:1; Psalm 148; Proverbs 30:4; Isaiah 42:5; John 1:3; Acts 17:24–25. (A copy of the Scripture references is provided in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.) Encourage the class to listen for what the passages tell us about God.
6. After the reading, call for responses. Jot responses under "Good News" on the marker board. (Answers might include: God is great, God created the world, God created us, God has dominion over creation, the heavens declare God's glory, and so on.)
7. Now write the words "Bad News" at the top of the other end of the markerboard. Invite participants to scan Isaiah 46:5–9 as you read

it aloud. Then ask, *What is the bad news?* Jot down responses. Share with class members these additional ideas (you may want to include these on the markerboard):

- While we say, “God is big,” we often live as though God is small.
 - We offer what belongs to God—our praise, dedication, and service—to something or someone else.
 - We fall into the trap of idolatry just as the Israelites did.
 - We may worship with our songs, but do we worship with our hearts and actions?
 - We forget the distinction between Creator and creation.
8. Call attention to Isaiah 46:5, noting that the obvious answer to God’s question is *no one*. Point out that just as God’s people struggled with idolatry in the Old Testament, idolatry continued in the New Testament.
 9. Direct members to Acts 17:24–31, and enlist someone to read the passage aloud. Use the information in the *Study Guide* and in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide* to present a brief overview of these verses. Be sure to note that the passage contains such elements as these, which are important for today: an emphasis on God’s greatness and dominion over all the earth; a warning against idolatry (God is near, and God is living); and a model for presenting the good news to others (use something people understand to bridge culture to the gospel).

Encourage Application

10. Ask, *If the news is so good, why do we sometimes live in competition with God?* Allow time for discussion, and then ask, *What are some of the idols we let stand in our way of truly worshiping God?* You may want to add these responses on the markerboard under “Bad News.”
11. Place previously prepared sentence strips containing Isaiah 46:8–9 in the middle of the markerboard, covering much of the good news and bad news lists. Suggest that these verses contain a key for God’s people to combat idolatry (remember).

12. Encourage participants to consider question 3 from the *Study Guide*, “In light of God’s unlimited domain, what areas of life are you holding back from God’s rule and lordship?”
13. Call attention to the globe once again, and comment that some class members may travel this week to another city, another state, or even another country, while others may not travel much farther than from the church to their homes. Encourage members, wherever they are this week, to remember and worship the God who created the world and whose dominion is unlimited!

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Ask, *What is your very first memory?* Allow a few minutes for sharing, and then inquire, *Do you remember the beginning of your life?* After no one responds with a *yes*, state that in today’s study we have a glimpse of God’s very beginning activity—an outflow of God’s mission, creation.
2. Refer to the Question to Explore, “How big is your God?” To further stimulate discussion you may want to ask the following questions:
 - Is your God big enough to watch over you?
 - Is your God big enough to take care of you?
 - Is your God big enough to heal the sick?
 - Is your God big enough to forgive sin?
 - Is your God big enough to bring new life?

Guide Bible Study

3. Display the following outline for today’s study:

- God’s Unlimited Dominion (Genesis 1:1)
- Idolatry in the Old Testament (Isaiah 46:5–9)
- Idolatry in the New Testament (Acts 17:24–31)

4. Invite participants to recite (or read from the *Study Guide*) Genesis 1:1 aloud. Point out that our understanding of God's mission begins with who God is—the Creator, who has unlimited dominion. Emphasize that God alone is Creator; all else is creation. Ask, *How can we grasp God's greatness?* Allow time for discussion.
5. Lead class members to discuss the following true or false statement: *While we profess God's greatness with our lips, we limit him with our actions.*
6. Direct pupils to Isaiah 46:5–9. Comment that not only do these verses remind us of God's greatness, but they also point out the tendency of people to worship creation rather than the Creator. Enlist someone to read the passage. Then ask:
 - What does God suggest of himself in verse 5?
 - What kind of idols did people establish?
 - How were those idols limited?
 - What is the key word in verse 8?
 - What is the result of remembering?
7. Point out that God's command to "remember" (Isa. 46:8, NASB) is a must for our proper worship, and that this is not the first time God instructed his people to do so. As time allows, read the following verses (or portions of them) from Deuteronomy aloud to illustrate God's desire for his people to remember: 4:10; 5:15; 7:18; 8:2; 8:18; 15:15; 16:3; 16:12; 24:9; 24:18. (A copy of the Scripture references is provided in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org.)
8. Share the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18, noting that worship of other things (idolatry) is irrational when we remember the bigness of God.
9. Invite a class member to read Acts 17:24–31 aloud, and then invite members to scan verses 16–32 for responses to the following:
 - To whom was Paul talking?
 - How did he capture their attention?
 - What was Paul's message?
 - How did the Athenians respond?

Encourage Application

10. Ask, *What do the Scripture passages in this lesson suggest to you about God, especially God's bigness? How can we remember God's greatness?* Summarize the small article "Recognizing the Bigness of God" in the *Study Guide*. Follow up with this question, *What are some implications and actions that follow from what we learn about God in these passages?* Summarize "Focusing on the Meaning" in this *Teaching Guide*. Encourage responses to some of the questions.
11. Before closing in prayer, encourage class members to consider actions they need to take in response to the Scripture passages in this lesson and to study carefully the Scripture passages for the next lesson.

NOTES

1. YHWH represents the divine name of God in the Old Testament and is sometimes spelled as *Yahweh*.
2. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, trans. , John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 246.
3. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 87.
4. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.