

Session 1

Waters of Creation

Before God makes anything, water and the Spirit are already together.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers for themselves that the Bible opens with water and the Spirit of God paired together (Genesis 1:2), that God creates life *through* the waters, and that the New Testament describes salvation in exactly the same vocabulary: new creation, washing, rebirth, Spirit.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church reads the waters of creation as the first announcement of Baptism. The Catechism calls water the source of life and fruitfulness from the beginning of the world, overshadowed by the Spirit of God (CCC 1218), and the Easter Vigil blessing of baptismal water begins at Genesis 1:2 before it ever reaches the font.

What You Need to Know

This opening session sets the method for the whole study, so take it slowly. We are not going to start with a doctrine and hunt for proof texts. We are going to start where the Bible starts, watch a pattern emerge, and let the group name the pattern themselves. The pattern is this: in the Bible's great scenes of creation and rescue, water and the Spirit of God appear strikingly together. Tonight the group only needs to see the first instance clearly.

Genesis 1:2 gives us three things before a single creative word is spoken: a formless void, darkness over the deep, and *the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters*. The Hebrew verb pictures a bird hovering or brooding over its nest (the same verb describes an eagle over its young in Deuteronomy 32:11). Before light, before land, before life, the Spirit broods over water. Then notice where life actually comes from on day five: God says, *let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures* (Genesis 1:20). In the Genesis picture, water is not an obstacle to life; it is the element God chooses to fill with life.

Hold that picture next to the New Testament's salvation vocabulary. St. Paul calls anyone in Christ *a new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17), reaching back to Genesis; and Baptism, Paul teaches elsewhere, is how a person comes to be *in Christ* (Galatians 3:27). Titus 3:5 says God saved us *by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit*: washing (water) and Holy Spirit, side by side, in a single sentence about how salvation actually reaches a person. The group will find Titus 3:5 themselves tonight; resist the urge to hand it to them.

A word about the room. This is a mixed parish group: cradle Catholics, reverts, seekers, possibly people whose children or grandchildren have left the faith and whose questions about Baptism are not academic. The apologetic spine of this study is real, but it should never feel like a debate club. The tone we want is discovery and wonder first; the arguments will land harder later precisely because the group has seen the pattern with their own eyes.

Expect one honest objection to surface early, and welcome it: is water not just an obvious religious symbol that every culture reaches for? Do not rush past this; it is tonight's steelman, and the answer (that Scripture pairs water with the Spirit as an instrument of God's action, not a generic symbol of cleanness) is the seed of everything the next thirteen sessions will grow.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2 (RSV2CE)

The fulfillment texts keep this exact grammar. Water plus Spirit equals new life: at the Jordan (Session 9), in the Lord's words to Nicodemus (Session 10), and already here in the letters of Paul:

he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit

Titus 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Palingenesia means regeneration, rebirth: and the word's very shape, a genesis again, has always invited Christian ears back to the Bible's opening page. Paul tells Titus that salvation arrives as a washing joined to the Holy Spirit; the Church hears the waters of the beginning behind it.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Tertullian • *On Baptism, ch. 1*

"Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life!"

With this sentence, verified word for word against the standard English translation, Tertullian opens the earliest surviving treatise on Baptism, written around the year 200: joy before argument. In the chapters that follow he teaches, in substance, that water has been the seat of the divine Spirit since Genesis 1:2, and that this ancient partnership is why water, of all creatures, is fitted to carry sanctifying power.

Leader note: Tertullian is a Father of the Church but not a saint; late in life he fell into the rigorist Montanist movement. The Church still treasures his early works. If asked, say so plainly; his complicated ending is a good reminder that the early Church contained real people, not statues.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan • *On the Mysteries; On the Sacraments*

St. Ambrose, catechizing the newly baptized of Milan in the fourth century, teaches in substance that the Spirit who *was moving over the face of the waters* at creation already pointed toward the font, and that water by itself heals no one: it is the Spirit's presence, invoked over the water, that makes Baptism a new creation rather than a bath.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Liturgy • *Blessing of Baptismal Water, Easter Vigil (Roman Missal)*

Every Easter Vigil, before anyone is baptized, the Church prays over the font to the God “whose Spirit in the first moments of the world's creation hovered over the waters, so that the very substance of water would even then take to itself the power to sanctify” (Roman Missal, Blessing of Baptismal Water).

This is not a private theologian's opinion; it is the Church praying her faith aloud: the font's whole family history recited over the water in one prayer.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1213 defines the stakes for the whole study: Baptism is the basis of the entire Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. CCC 1217 and 1218 ground tonight specifically: in the Easter Vigil liturgy the Church solemnly commemorates the great events of salvation history that already prefigured the mystery of Baptism, and since the beginning of the world water, so humble and wonderful a creature, has been the source of life and fruitfulness, with Scripture seeing it as overshadowed by the Spirit of God.

CCC 694 adds the pneumatological key: in Baptism, water symbolizes not scrubbing but the Holy Spirit's action, since after the invocation of the Spirit the water becomes the efficacious sacramental sign of new birth. Keep that word *efficacious* in your pocket; the group will need it by Session 2.

Paragraphs for this session: 1213, 1217–1218, 694

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Planted tonight, resolved later. (1) *Why water?* This is the study's master thread and the sealed My Guess question on Take-Home 1; it resolves at Session 7 (Ezekiel pairs water and Spirit in prophecy) with full payoff at Session 10 (John 3:5). Do not answer it tonight, even if someone answers it well. (2) *Water plus Spirit, always together.* Name the pairing tonight as an observation only; the group should start spotting it on their own by Session 3. (3) *Life comes out of the waters* (Genesis 1:20) quietly sets up the font as womb at Session 11. Plant it with a single sentence and move on.

Sealed guess mechanics. Take-Home 1 carries the My Guess box: *Why do you think God chose water?* Participants write, fold, keep. Collect nothing. At Session 7 they will open their own guesses. Sealed questions do more work than answered ones; protect the seal.

Session Goals

1. The group can state what is present in Genesis 1:2 before anything is made: water, darkness, and the Spirit of God.
2. The group has personally located Titus 3:5 and noticed water and Spirit in one salvation sentence.
3. The group can say the phrase *new creation* and connect it to Genesis, not just to a feeling.

4. The steelman (water as generic symbol) has been heard at full strength and answered from the text.
5. Every participant leaves with Take-Home 1 and understands the sealed My Guess box.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Genesis 1:1–2 read aloud, observation questions Q1-Q3

10 min • Build: Genesis 1:20–22, life from the waters, Q4

15 min • Live discovery: hunting the pattern in the New Testament (Titus 3:5, 2 Corinthians 5:17)

10 min • Steelman: is water just a symbol every religion uses?

10 min • Send questions and Live It This Week

10 min • Memory verse, Take-Home 1 walkthrough with sealed My Guess, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q4 (Genesis 1:20 can be summarized by the leader in one sentence) and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the steelman or the sealed guess.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters, and you spoke light into darkness. Tonight we open the very first page of your word. Give us eyes to see what you have placed there, patience with our questions, and joy in what we find. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Where were you baptized, if you know? Who was there? What, if anything, do you know about that day?

QW2. When you hear the word *water*, what is the first image that comes to mind: something life-giving, something dangerous, or something ordinary? Why?

Build • into the text

Have someone read Genesis 1:1–2 aloud, slowly. Then read it a second time, and ask the group to listen for what already exists before God says a single word.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1–2 (RSV2CE)

Q1. Before God speaks in verse 3, what is actually on stage? Make the list together.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Three things: the formless void, darkness over the deep, and the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters. The point to draw out: the very first picture the Bible gives us of God at work over his world is God's Spirit paired with water. Genesis 1:1 has already said that God created the heavens and the earth; before his first spoken command, that created world lies unformed and dark, and the first thing Scripture shows us over it is this pairing.

Q2. The Hebrew verb for the Spirit *moving* pictures a bird hovering or brooding over a nest. What does a brooding bird expect to come out from under her?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Life. The verb pictures a bird hovering, fluttering over its nest: Deuteronomy 32:11 uses the same word for an eagle over her young. The strict claim is the hovering; but many readers have always heard expectancy in it, the way life is waited for, and the study will let that meditation breathe without leaning on it.

Q3. Skim down to Genesis 1:20–22. On day five, where does God command life to come from?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

From the waters: *let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures*. In Genesis, water is the element God commands to teem with life; later Christian reflection would love to call it the first womb of the living world, a typology rather than the verse's own claim. If the group is warm, plant one sentence and move on: hold onto that image of water as a womb; it will come back near the end of this study.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Now the hunt. Say to the group: somewhere in the New Testament, Paul describes salvation using this same Genesis furniture: water and the Holy Spirit in a single sentence, and the idea of creation happening again. Give them these two references cold and have them find and read both: **Titus 3:5** and **2 Corinthians 5:17**. Ask: where is the water? Where is the Spirit? Where is Genesis?

Let them make the connections aloud before you confirm anything. The discovery belongs to them.

Q4. Titus 3:5 says God saved us *by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit*. What two things does Paul put side by side in that sentence, and what does he say they accomplish?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A washing (water) and the Holy Spirit, and together they accomplish salvation: *he saved us... by them*. The Greek behind *regeneration* is *palingenesia*, literally a second genesis. Paul is not decorating; he is telling us the mechanism. And notice what Paul rules out in the same breath: not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy. Baptism is not our work climbing up; it is God's mercy coming down through water and Spirit, exactly the Genesis shape.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Read this objection to the group at full strength, in your own warm voice: many religious traditions use water. Hindus bathe in the Ganges; the ancient world was full of ritual washings; water suggests cleansing everywhere because everyone gets dirty. And the serious Christian form of the objection goes further: grant that God commanded Baptism as a covenant sign; the water is still a sign, picturing a cleansing God works directly in the soul. Genesis 1:2 mentions water because ancient people lived near water. Reading Baptism into it is wishful thinking.

Q5. Sit with it honestly: what is genuinely right about this objection?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede what is true: water is a near-universal religious symbol, and the Church is not embarrassed by that; grace builds on nature, and God chose a sign the whole human race could

read. But the objection misses what the group saw with their own eyes tonight. In Genesis, water is not a symbol of getting clean; nothing is dirty yet. Water appears paired with the Spirit as the element God works *through* to bring forth life. And Titus 3:5 keeps precisely that grammar: not water as picture, but washing-plus-Spirit as the stated means by which *he saved us*. And to the more serious form: the Church agrees entirely that Baptism is a commanded covenant sign; the question the rest of this study puts to the apostles' own sentences is whether the God who commands the sign also works through it. That claim cannot be tested from Genesis alone, which is why we have thirteen more sessions. Tonight's finding is narrower and solid: from its first verses, Scripture pairs water with the Spirit of God where life is given: whether God actually works through water is exactly what the coming sessions will test.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

If the group is strong, put John 1:1–5 beside Genesis 1:1–5. John deliberately reopens Genesis (*In the beginning...*) to announce a new creation in Christ. Ask: if John is rewriting Genesis 1 around Jesus, what should we expect to find within a few verses of his Gospel? (Answer, which the group will confirm at Sessions 8–9: water and the Spirit at the Jordan, in chapter 1, verses 29–34.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. You heard the objection tonight that water is just a symbol. Before this study, is that quietly what you believed about Baptism? What would it change in your week if Titus 3:5 is literally true?

QS2. Who is one person in your life whose Baptism you could pray for by name this week: a child, a godchild, someone drifting, someone never baptized?

Live It This Week

- Once this week, bless yourself with holy water slowly and deliberately, and as you do, say in your heart: *the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters*.
- Find out the date of your own Baptism if you do not know it (a parent, a baptismal certificate, the parish office). Write it somewhere you will see it.
- Read Genesis 1 straight through once, alone, listening for water.

Memory Verse

he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit

Titus 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord God, your Spirit hovered over the waters and the world woke into life. Hover over us. Hover over our families, over the baptized who have wandered, over every name we carried into this room tonight. Make us new creations, and bring us back next week with open eyes. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Genesis 1:1-2 • Opening reading: water, darkness, Spirit before creation

Deuteronomy 32:11 • Leader background: the brooding-bird verb

Genesis 1:20-22 • Life brought forth from the waters

Titus 3:5 • Live discovery: washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit; memory verse

2 Corinthians 5:17 • Live discovery: new creation

John 1:1-5 • Dig Deeper: John reopens Genesis