
5 Themes To Help You Understand the Bible



THE VERY FIRST SENTENCE of Genesis reveals the main character of the entire Bible, God: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). From start to finish, every book of the Bible, every chapter and verse, reveals who God is and what God does. This is why one of the most helpful questions we can ask to understand any passage of Scripture is also one of the simplest: What does this text teach us about God? The Bible is the self-revelation of the creator to his creation. This means that to read the Bible well, we must always remember that it is about God first and foremost. He is the main character; we are not. If we make ourselves the main character of the Bible, then we will miss the message God wants us to understand.

Here’s an example to help make this point. Recall the story of David and Goliath (if you don’t know the story or need a refresher, take a few minutes to read 1 Samuel 17). If we were to make ourselves the main character of this story, then we would probably interpret it something like this. First off, we would likely identify ourselves with David (of course, we aren’t the evil giant!). Like David, we face “giants” in life. Most of us aren’t regularly attacked by nine-foot-tall men, so to make ourselves the main character in the story we have to get a little creative and turn Goliath into an allegorical symbol for something else. The

“giants” in our lives might be any sort of hardship or trial. Everybody has something difficult in their life they can plug in the story as their personal “giant.” The message we take away from reading the story of David and Goliath in this manner is essentially that we must overcome our problems by, symbolically, taking up our sling and stones. Perhaps it is the stone of faith: we just need to believe harder or live holier, and then our hardships and trials will disappear.

This way of reading the Bible makes it easy to relate the story of David and Goliath to our lives and what we are going through. The problem, however, is that it completely and totally misses the point! We are not the main character, and the Bible is not all about us. God is the main character, and the story of David and Goliath is about him! If instead we ask what this story teaches us about God, then the message is quite different: In a nutshell, God is mighty and saves his people. All of the Israelites lived in terror of Goliath, but God sent a humble shepherd boy with a mere sling to defeat the enemy of his people. This teaches us something of God’s character, and it ultimately points us to the way he will save his people eternally from their sins by coming in humility, not power, to suffer and die. To read the Bible rightly, we must begin with the understanding that it is both *from* God and *about* God.¹

¹ This resource is excerpted from the Core Bible Study, *How to Read the Bible*. [You can get the full study here.](#)



JUST BECAUSE THE BIBLE is first and foremost about God doesn't mean it isn't about us at all. What we need to understand, however, is that the Bible teaches us who we are, what we should believe, and how we should live *in relation* to our God. From its first pages, the Bible shows us that God relates to humanity through covenants. In simplest terms, a covenant is an agreement between two or more parties and has terms or stipulations. To put it another way: in a covenant relationship, there are expectations placed on each person or party involved. Typically, there are rewards for meeting those expectations and punishments for failing to do what was pledged. Understanding what a covenant is, being able to recognize one, and understanding the conditions in a covenant are helpful skills for reading the Bible. This is true, because—while the Bible has many major themes (such as creation, fall, and redemption)—covenant is the

framework on which all the Bible's main themes are built. Theologian Michael Horton says,

What unites [the themes of the Bible] is not itself a central dogma but an architectonic structure, a matrix of beams and pillars that hold together the structure of biblical faith and practice. That particular architectural structure . . . is the covenant.²

In other words, the story and message of the Bible is unified thematically through covenant. The Bible reveals a God who enters into personal and legal relationships with his creatures. Even more, the Bible reveals that every single human being relates to God in a covenantal manner. The pages of Scripture teach us that there are only two ways fundamentally in which a human can relate to God: through the law or through the gospel.

² Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 13.

Law and Gospel

AFTER GOD CREATED the first man, Adam, he gave him several commands and one specific prohibition. Adam had laws, or rules, that he was created to follow. He was to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This verse is sometimes referred to as the “Creation Mandate,” because it outlines what Adam was expected to do as the overseer of God’s creation.

In addition to these positive commands, God gave Adam another law, or imperative: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Adam’s relationship with God contained all the elements of a covenant. There are two parties, God and Adam, and each party had expectations placed upon them. In particular, Adam was expected to fulfill the Creation Mandate while obeying God’s law and not eating the forbidden fruit. If he was obedient, then he would have the right to eternal life. If he failed to do what God required of him, however, the penalty was death.

God was expected to keep his word and hold up his end of the deal: sustaining Adam’s life and not causing or letting him die so long as he was obedient. This relationship is sometimes referred to as the “Covenant of Works,” because Adam’s relationship with God is harmonious so long as he “does the work”—that is, as long as he obeys God’s law. Through the law, people can have a relationship with God and eternal life if they are perfectly obedient to him.

While the law is one way for us to have a good

relationship with God, we can now see that it is only a hypothetical path to eternal life. We know that Adam did not obey: he ate the forbidden fruit, and as a result, death and sin corrupted the world God created (Rom. 5:12–14). Try as we may, we cannot earn eternal life through our own obedience and goodness. God’s law demands perfect and perpetual obedience. God’s law is completely just, so no act of disobedience, great or small, can be overlooked. As the apostle Paul explains, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

When it comes to salvation from the punishment for our sin, the law is a dead end. The law can show us how we have messed up, but it can’t teach us how to be healed of our sin. The law can diagnose our disease, but it can’t offer a viable cure. You see, trying to earn God’s favor and love through obedience to the law in order to make it to heaven is like getting on a treadmill in order to walk to a destination. No matter how fast you run or how long you stay on the treadmill, you will never reach the place you want to go. Under the law, humanity is in a hopeless situation, but thanks be to God that he has provided another way to have a relationship with him! God made a promise to Adam and all humanity. He promised another way to eternal life. This promise is called the gospel.

The word *gospel* literally means “good news.” In contrast to the law, which is full of commands, the gospel is a statement of fact. The gospel is God’s promise that if we repent of our sins and believe that Jesus Christ suffered the punishment we deserve on the cross, then we are forgiven, reconciled to God, and have eternal life. This salvation cannot come through the law; only through the gospel. Paul explained it this way to the church in Galatia:

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

Christians are not justified—that is, declared righteous—on the basis of our goodness. Christians are justified on the basis of Jesus’ righteousness, which is given to us when we believe in him. Salvation comes through faith, not by works of obedience. Furthermore, the gospel promise of the Bible tells us that redemption is made possible by entering into a new covenant with God. Born into the covenant of works, we cannot save ourselves. But God in his mercy freely offers eternal life through the gift of faith. We don’t need to save ourselves,

because Christ has already done the work we are supposed to do and suffered the punishment we deserve. The gospel is sometimes called the “Covenant of Grace,” because in the gospel we see that salvation is an entirely undeserved and unearned gift from God. God offers eternal life. All we must do is trust in Christ, who accomplished our salvation for us.



ANOTHER FUNDAMENTAL THEME that provides an underlying structure to the Bible is the “kingdom of God.” Theologian Vaughn Roberts defines the kingdom of God as “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing”³ Although this definition is broad, it doesn’t mean it’s shallow. The idea of God’s kingdom is one that emerges from the pages of the Bible from beginning to end, as we see how God relates to his people over time, in some ways that are similar and some that are different.

For example, under Moses, the Israelites were governed by God. They had a theocracy, a rule by God, and Moses represented God to the people as God’s prophet. Later in Israel’s history, this theocracy gave way to a monarchy and the Jews were ruled by earthly kings. Yet even when Israel had a monarchy, they were still God’s kingdom because they were his people. This is why the theme of “kingdom” is complementary to the theme of “covenant.” The subjects of God’s kingdom are his covenant people whom he has called, by his word, to be a part of the church.

God’s covenant people are what we call “the church.” The church is not a building or location; it is the people God called out of sin and darkness into his kingdom of righteousness and light. Our entrance into the church is not something we can accomplish on our own, because sin excludes each of us from citizenship in God’s kingdom. As Paul explained, though “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Yet God chose to show grace by sending Christ to die for our sins.

Through faith in Christ, we enter into the covenant

of grace and become citizens of God’s kingdom today. The church now is a spiritual kingdom, ruled by Christ, which dwells in the midst of the various kingdoms of this world. As members of the church, we look to the Bible for instruction on how to live and believe (see Matt. 5–7 as an example). In addition, the Bible teaches us that, as members of God’s kingdom, we have become and are becoming a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

³ Vaughn Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 21.

TO READ THE BIBLE WELL, we must recognize its overarching story of God and his creation. It begins with creation itself and, as we have seen, then tells us how the fall of humanity swiftly changed everything. As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's law, both creation and humanity are corrupted. The gospel hope is that humans as individuals, and creation as a whole, will be made new once again. God promises that the effects of sin and death, which placed the whole creation under God's curse, will be undone. This future is expressed poignantly in Revelation 21:1–4,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and

the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

This is the hope of every Christian. Praise be to God!

