

A Bird's-Eye View of the Bible

John Chapman

The basic message of the Bible can be summed up in a passage from 2 Corinthians 5:19: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

The story of the Bible is how God achieves this. It has many important themes and subthemes, the most important of which we will now trace, first by looking at the "shadow" of this reconciling work in the Old Testament, and then at its glorious fulfillment and reality in Jesus.

The Shadow

Creation and Fall

The Bible opens with God creating the world by his word. He speaks it into being. He says, "Let there be light," and so it is.

Humanity is the pinnacle of the creation. This is clear from the way the man names the animals and tends the Garden of Eden in which God has placed him. It is not because he is more intelligent than the animals, but because he is qualitatively different, being made in the image of God and having been given dominion by God to rule over the creation under God (Gen. 1:26–27).

God institutes marriage. Humans are to be social beings as well as spiritual. They are not only related to God and the world around them, but they are to relate to one another in a loving and sharing relationship. This is exactly what life was like as it is described for us in the Garden of Eden. We are told that the man and the woman were naked and felt no shame (Gen. 2:25). The symbolism here is beautiful. They were completely exposed. There was nothing they had hidden or wanted to hide from each other. Their deep longings could be shared without fear of laughter or ridicule. There was opportunity for social development and for marriage security.

Provision was made for their spiritual growth. God came and walked with them in the cool of the day, and they had fellowship with him. There was a tree in the middle of the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were not to eat of the fruit of this tree. With the prohibition there was a penalty attached. God said to them: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but 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. 2:16–17).

This enabled their spiritual maturity to develop. They had an opportunity to demonstrate to God their love for him by this act of obedience. Without it, there was no way to show it. There was food in abundance, so that this simple act of obedience was not a burden.

Provision was also made for them to be responsible for the environment. This is the idea behind the naming of the animals and the dominion to be exercised over them, as well as the care of the garden (Gen. 1:26; 2:15).

This wonderful world, as God intended—without fear, hatred, or disappointment—is described for us in Genesis 1 and 2. It gives a wonderful insight into God's purpose. However, it is so foreign to us as to be like fairyland. By the time we get to the end of the next chapter, we are in a world like ours. There are tensions between the man and the woman. They are no longer friends with God. Work is hard, and they are not at one with their environment. We cannot help but ask the question, "What went wrong?"

A Reversal of Order

In what can only be seen as a reversal of order, we are introduced to an animal—the serpent—who instructs the woman that they should rebel against the God who has been so good to them, and the woman in turn tells the man. They should have been in charge of the animals, and not the reverse. The serpent suggests that God has not been good to them at all; that he has, in fact, withheld from them the greatest of all blessings, namely, Godhood. He then tempts them with a threefold rebellion.

The first is to rebel against the Word of God. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" The woman is quick to correct this misrepresentation. The serpent counters with a suggestion that brings two further rebellions. To her statement that they must not eat or even touch the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and that if they do they will die, he says, "That's a lie. God has not given you every good thing. He knows that if you eat it, you'll become as God—and what's more, you won't die." He incites them to rebel against the goodness of God, and also against the idea that God will judge them.

What followed is history. They acted on the threefold rebellion. They lost their fellowship with God. The punishment of death in the spiritual realm was instantaneous. They were frightened by God's presence. They blamed God for their dilemma. They treated God as their equal. They were spiritually dead. The beginning of the aging process heralded their physical death. And they were put out of the garden and no longer had access to the tree of life. Nothing could have been worse than for them to live indefinitely in this rebellious state, which is called eternal death. God separated them from the tree of life, so that there was a "breathing time," a time to repent, lest their spiritual death solidify into eternal death.

That was the worst thing that could happen, but, in addition, their marriage was under threat. Childbearing was made difficult. The woman was now tempted to dominate the man. The environment was no longer friendly.

There Is Hope

It is a bleak picture. There is no way for humanity to rectify the situation. They are now "dead" in their relationship to God. They no longer want God. They are threatened by him. Only an act of God's undeserved kindness, or grace, can reverse this situation. Two things assure us that God will intervene. The expulsion from the garden (itself part of the death penalty) gives humanity time and opportunity to repent. This aspect of death has in some sense been delayed. In addition, God gives a promise that the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head. Humanity will triumph over the Evil One (Gen. 3:15).

It may appear that God's plan to make humanity in his own image has been frustrated or even thwarted. This is not the case. The rest of the Bible tells the story of how God achieves his plan.

Abraham and the People of God

God calls a man, Abraham, and makes a promise to him, the fulfillment of which will achieve the purposes God had when he created. This promise contains three parts. God will make Abraham's offspring into a great nation—his people. God will give them a land in which to dwell—a second Garden of Eden. And through his people, God will bring blessing to the whole human race (Gen. 12:2–3).

This threefold promise began to be fulfilled in the birth of Abraham's son Isaac, and through Isaac's son Jacob, and through Jacob's twelve sons. By various circumstances, Jacob and his twelve sons came into Egypt, where they did in fact grow into a great nation, just as God had promised. But, as yet, they did not have their own land. They were slaves in the land of Egypt.

God, true to his promise, saved them from their slavery. He raised up Moses to lead them to their Promised Land. The rescue—or exodus—God achieved for them. They were powerless to achieve it for themselves. He intervened and redeemed them. He brought them to Mt. Sinai, where he gave them the law so they could give full expression to their love and thankfulness to him through their obedience. (You can read this in Gen. 15:50 and Ex. 1:40.)

Because they were a people on the move, and because they lived in tents, God instructed them to make a tent for him. It was called "the tabernacle." It represented God's presence with his people. It was carried in front of them when they were on the move, and when they camped it was pitched in the middle of the encampment. Its symbolism was obvious. This continued until the tabernacle was replaced under the reign of King Solomon, who built the temple at Jerusalem. This permanent building on a permanent site was to show that God would always be with his people (see 1 Kings 6:9).

As well as the law, God gave his people a system of sacrifices. Some were designed to show them that, when they had sinned, something needed to be done for them to be restored to fellowship with God again. Others were designed to keep their relationship with God healthy.

The people of God were delayed from entering into the Promised Land because of their disobedience to God. The delay lasted until an entire generation had died out. This forty-year wilderness wandering is described in the book of Numbers. It is a sorry time in their history. The purposes of God seem to dim and almost disappear.

However, a new generation under a new leader entered the Promised Land and took possession of it at God's command. Once again God gave them victories over their enemies, which they would not have achieved without him. It was grace again! (See the book of Joshua.) However, they failed to achieve what God required of them. They did not drive out all the nations as they were bidden, and their continued disobedience should have disqualified them from being God's people.

True enough, they were God's people, but they did not live as if they were. They were in their land, but not all of it, and they were not a blessing to the whole human race. They were meant to be an object lesson to all the nations of the world. They were to show how wonderful it was for a nation to have God as their God. Instead, they behaved like every other nation around them.

Although God was their king and protector, they asked God to give them a king like the nations around them, to rule them and bring peace and justice, and to drive out their enemies. It was a rejection of God, but he graciously allowed them to have such a king to do as they had requested.

A King for God's People

Under the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, the hopes of the people of God for their king were almost achieved. Those kings did save Israel from its enemies. They did rule with justice. Those kings respected God's rule and sought to live under it. They enlarged the borders of Israel, and the people became very prosperous. Solomon built the temple, and God graced it with his presence. The visit of the Queen of Sheba to the court of Solomon was like the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise that all the nations would be blessed through God's people (1 Kings 10). However, as great as those two kings were, their feet were of clay. They sinned and they led Israel to sin. Their successors were a pitiful lot who, with rare exceptions, led Israel into idolatry. They did not give justice to the poor, but ground them into the earth. They behaved like the nations around them. They were not distinctively God's.

They gave up on God, but, mercifully, he did not give up on them. Over a period of hundreds of years, God sent the prophets to his people to call them back to himself.

Promises of Renewal—a King and a Servant

Not only did God call his people back to repentance; he also made new promises that he would change them, so that they would want to obey him instead of always disobeying him. This is one from Jeremiah:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31, 33–34)

A similar one comes from the prophet Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25–27)

In addition to these promises, there was another cluster of promises about a new king, a king like David and Solomon, but without their flaws. This king, or Messiah, would not only drive out their enemies and cause them to live properly with each other and with God, but would be the means of bringing them back into the "new" Promised Land, the "new" Eden (Isa. 11; Ps. 2). This kingdom would be an everlasting kingdom. It would be the fulfillment of all God's promises (Dan. 7:13–14).

The prophet Isaiah also told of the Servant of God who would take on himself the sins of God's people and be the means of their total forgiveness (Isa. 52:13, 53:12).

The Reality

The Kingdom Is Near

Hundreds of years went by. The fulfillment of God's promises seemed as far away as ever. Yet, in a godly remnant, the hope for their Messiah-King was kept alive. John the Baptist's arrival on the scene electrified the people of God with the announcement that the kingdom of God was near. The long-promised king was near at hand. They should ready themselves by repenting or else be swept away by him in judgment (Matt. 3:1–12). The Lord Jesus comes with the same message (Mark 1:15).

Jesus Is the Fulfillment of All God's Promises and Purposes

There is no doubt that, as we read the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is the fulfiller of all of God's promises. In fact, the whole of the Old Testament is really about him (John 5:39–40). God has been preparing us through everything that has gone before, so that we would recognize Jesus in all his fullness. Although the events already described were real themselves, they were a "shadow" of the Reality, which is Jesus Christ.

Jesus and Adam

When God created humanity, it was in "his own image" (Gen. 1:26–27). The entry of sin marred this image. No longer was it possible to see God's character by looking at the man or the woman, or at any other men or women. We had to wait until Jesus came before we saw again a human in the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4). To know Jesus was to know the Father (John 14:9–10). Unlike Adam, Jesus would not heed the Evil One when he

tempted him to disobedience. Adam was surrounded by every evidence of God's goodness and failed. Jesus was tested in the desert (Matt. 4:1–11) and suffered on the cross (Matt. 27:41–43), yet he continued to obey his Father. When God said, "Let us make man in our own image," it was with the Lord Jesus in view. Jesus fulfilled the purposes of God. Yet it does not stop there. We, who are in Christ, are having the image of God restored in us (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29). It will be done perfectly when Jesus returns and takes us to be with him in the new creation (1 John 3:2). God's purposes are not thwarted.

Jesus—the Seed of the Woman

The promise given to Adam and Eve at the time of the Fall, that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. No doubt when Eve gave birth to Cain, her firstborn, she thought he would be the "head-crusher." She was sorely mistaken. Jesus defeated the power of Satan when he died on the cross. He took the punishment our sins deserved. He opened a way for our total forgiveness, thus snatching us from the power of the Evil One (Col. 2:13–15; Luke 11:14–22). As before, we who are in Christ will have Satan crushed under our feet (Rom. 16:20).

Jesus—the Promise to Abraham—and the People of God

When God made his promise to Abraham, that he would give him a people and that all the nations of the world would be blessed through them, it was really Jesus he was speaking about (Gal. 3:16). Jesus is the true "people of God." Israel is referred to as the vine in Isaiah 5, but Jesus says that *he is the true vine* in John 15 and that, by union with him, we are the true people of God. This is just one of many similar examples of how references to Israel are applied to the Lord Jesus. Unlike Israel, who failed again and again in their wilderness wandering, Jesus the true Israelite did not fail in his temptations (Matt. 4:1–11).

Jesus is the light to the Gentiles. It is through him that the world mission is to take place. The gospel is for all nations. In Jesus, all the nations of the world will indeed be blessed (Matt. 28:19).

Jesus and the Exodus

Moses is used by God to save his people from their slavery and to bring them to their Promised Land. This is a picture of the great exodus, which Jesus performs through his death and resurrection. By his sin-bearing sacrifice, he sets the captives free from sin and death. He sets us free to serve God, and he will bring us to the new creation, which he is preparing (Col. 2:13–15; John 14:1–4; Rev. 21–22). On the mountain, when the Lord Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah came and spoke with Jesus about the "exodus" which he would fulfill in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). The exodus that Moses achieved was a pale shadow of the great exodus that Jesus achieved.

Jesus and the Sacrificial System

The sacrificial system that God gave to his people at Mt. Sinai was really a picture of the Lord Jesus. He was the Lamb of God, who bore the sin of the world (John 1:29). When Jesus took our punishment in his death on the cross, he bought permanent forgiveness for us. He was perfect and without sin. He needed no forgiveness. We, on the other hand, are sinful and under the punishment of death (Rom. 6:23). Jesus took that punishment when he died for us and for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1–2). He opened a permanent way back to God. His sacrifice was better than that of any previous sacrifice because it was permanent, as the letter to the Hebrews argues (Heb. 9–10). When we look at the death of Jesus for us, we know that God loves us. We know that sin matters and will not go unpunished. We know, also, that God is merciful. We experience all these attributes of God, in perfect harmony.

Jesus—the Tabernacle and the Temple

When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19), he was talking about his bodily resurrection from the dead. His disciples recognized this after the event (John 2:19–22). It is Jesus who is the temple of God. We meet the Father through the Son. He is God in the midst of his people, and he is the place where God dwells. We, too, as individual Christians and as the church, are the temple of God when we are "in Christ" (1 Cor. 6:19; 3:16).

Jesus—the King and the Suffering Servant

Supremely, Jesus fulfills all the promises about the Messiah who would come and the Suffering Servant. The voice of God, which was heard at Jesus' baptism and at the Mount of Transfiguration, said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Those who knew their Old Testament would have recognized that these were two quotations. One was from Psalm 2, and the other from Isaiah 42. One refers to the Messiah, the King of Israel, and the other to the Suffering Servant.

Jesus explained this to his disciples. They had confessed that he was the Messiah, and he began to teach them that he would suffer, die, and be raised to life again (Matt. 16:16–23).

The sayings and miracles of Jesus showed the extent of his kingly rule. He showed himself to be Lord over the bodies and minds of people. He healed the sick, he forgave sins, and he raised the dead. There was no aspect of life in the creation over which he was not Lord. He exorcised demons. Even they were subject to him.

Until Jesus came, no one had ever thought that the King could also be the Suffering Servant. They seemed to be mutually exclusive. Many of Jesus' contemporaries had been brought up all their life to think of the Messiah in terms of Psalm 2, where God says to his King: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:7–9).

It seemed an impossibility that Jesus should "suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31), to say nothing of the fact that he would be "delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise" (Luke 18:31–33). Yet this is exactly what he did.

He taught the disciples that true greatness was through humble service. He said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Not only was he the Messiah and the Suffering Servant, he was also the Son of Man (from Daniel 7).

There was no doubt that Jesus was the King. His resurrection from the dead was irrefutable evidence of this. The disciples saw it to be a direct fulfillment of the promise, "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption" (Ps. 16:10). So they boldly proclaimed, "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). In this capacity, he has been appointed the judge of the living and the dead (John 5:19–30). That is why repentance is a proper response to him.

Judgment is a major theme of the gospel. In Revelation 14:6, an angel has an "eternal" gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth. Does this mean a gospel for the age to come or a gospel that will last forever? Whatever it means, please note its content. The angel cries out: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev. 14:7).

There was no doubt that Jesus was the Suffering Servant. The apostle Peter described him in this way—"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). The apostle Paul says of him that God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Jesus—the Center of All God's Purposes

It is clear that there is no way we can come to God except through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We may not come to the Father except through the Son, and we will not experience the Holy Spirit except through the Son. Jesus is at the center of all God's plans. All the promises of God reach their fulfillment in him. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20).

If it can be said with reverence, the Lord Jesus was in the "back of God's mind" when God said at the beginning, "Let there be light." This is how the apostle Paul describes the Lord Jesus:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created *through him and for him that in everything he might be preeminent*. (Col. 1:15–18)

The kingdom has arrived in Jesus, but it is not yet completed. We still wait for the Lord Jesus to return from heaven and to usher in the new creation, where all those who are Christ's, from all the nations, will be the people of God, with him in the "land" which God had promised to Abraham.

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