

# The Story and Message of the Bible

AN ESSAY BY

**Stephen Wellum**

## DEFINITION

The Bible is comprised of many books and written by various authors over centuries, but as God's Word it is a unified revelation unveiling a single message. It is crucial to understand what the Bible's overall message is to interpret it properly and rightly apply it to our lives.

## SUMMARY

This article explains what the central message of the Bible is by thinking through two ways of describing the overall story of Scripture. First, the Bible's plots movements of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation are explored to understand the Bible's message. Second, the Bible's story is explained by thinking through how God's plan is unveiled through the covenants from the creation covenant to the new covenant in Christ.

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The Bible is a big book that consists of many topics, diverse literature, and spans centuries. Yet, the Bible, despite being written by multiple authors and addressing various subjects, is one grand story whose central message is about what our triune Creator-covenant God planned in eternity, executed in time, to glorify himself by the redemption of his people, the judgment of sin, and making all things new in Christ Jesus ([Rom. 11:33-36](#); [Eph. 1:9-10](#); [Col. 1:15-20](#)).

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible's message is first and foremost about the triune God. It's centered in his name and glory, and how *he* has graciously chosen to share himself with us—although perfectly complete and satisfied in himself—which results to the praise of his glorious grace and our eternal good ([Eph. 2:1-10](#)).

We can outline the Bible's long and layered story in a couple of ways. First, we can capture it in terms of four major plot movements: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Second, we can describe the unfolding of God's eternal plan from creation to the new creation through the progression of the biblical covenants. Let's look at both of these ways of summarizing the Bible's overall story and message.

# The Bible's Story and Message through its Unfolding Plot Movements

By thinking through the Bible's plot movements, we can grasp the broadest contours of the Bible's story and message *and* think about the Bible's unique worldview against other views. Thinking through the Bible's plot movements helps us answer the questions that every person asks and must answer: Where did we come from? What went wrong? What is the solution to our problem? Where is history going?

## *Creation*

Where did everything come from? Genesis 1-2 gives us the account of God's creation of all things, including us, his creatures and image-bearers. Although this section of the Bible is short, it's theologically significant and foundational to everything that follows, setting the stage for the rest of the Bible's unfolding drama.

Here we meet several key characters and first grasp the setting for Scripture's story. Also, in creation, various typological patterns are established, that in the story will reach their fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant (e.g., the *rest* of the seventh day [Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:8-11] and salvation rest in Christ [Heb. 3:7-4:13]; Eden as a temple sanctuary that is fulfilled in Christ as the new temple; and marriage which points to a greater reality, namely Christ's relationship to his people [Gen. 2:24-25; Eph. 5:32]). *All* of these patterns will be progressively unpacked through the later covenants, all working toward an ultimate end and explaining the Bible's story.

## *Fall*

What went wrong? In Genesis 3, everything changed in God's good world. Adam, the first man, forever changed the direction of history with his choice to rebel against God. When tempted by the serpent, Adam disobeyed God and plunged all humanity into sin, death, and condemnation. The Fall establishes the terrible problem that the rest of Scripture is written to address.

Apart from Genesis 3, we cannot make sense of God's plan of redemption and how we, as humans, can stand justified before our holy God, given our sin. Because of Adam's sin and our banishment from God's presence, our only hope is found in God's gracious initiative to redeem and to reverse the effects of sin and death caused by Adam.

## *Redemption*

Where do we find hope? In Genesis 3:15, God promises that a son—the “seed” of the woman—will one day defeat the serpent and reverse what Adam did. Although humans merit death for their sin (Rom. 6:23), death will not have the last word. In truth, the rest of the Bible, with all of its stories and details—the people, the sacrificial system, its saving events—tells us how this will happen by slowly unfolding this “good news” promise, which ultimately leads us to Christ.

As history unfolds, Christ eventually comes—God's own Son—and by his life, death, and resurrection, the Father creates a new humanity, the church, who enjoy the full forgiveness of sins, new hearts, and access to the Father by the Spirit. In Christ, what the triune God originally intended for his creatures, crippled by the Fall, is now beginning to be restored.

## *New Creation*

Where is history going? The direction of history is toward the new creation, the goal and end of God's redeeming promise. The present order is the old creation in Adam, but Christ will bring a new creation. The OT prophets describe this new creation as arriving in the coming of God's King and Messiah. Through his life and cross-work, Jesus brings the new creation. In his return, the new creation is consummated, as beautifully portrayed in [Revelation 21-22](#). But even now, some of what John envisioned is present in Christ's people, who are a new creation, a colony of the future age, although we still await the fullness of it when Christ returns.

These four plot movements are one way of summarizing the Bible's story. They nicely capture the Bible's message of what God has planned in eternity, executed in time, to glorify himself by destroying sin and redeeming his people in Christ.

Yet, another way to grasp the Bible's message is by thinking about how God's redemptive plan, from creation to the new creation, progressively unfolds through the covenants.

## **The Bible's Story and Message through its Unfolding Covenants**

Scripture's plot movements help capture the Bible's message, but *covenants* serve as the backbone to the Bible's story that holds its diverse pieces together. *Covenant* is a word that describes who God is as the covenant Lord *and* his gracious choice to be our God—"I will be their God, and they shall be my people" ([Jer. 31:33](#)). Through the covenants, we come to know what God's eternal plan is. Each covenant, from Adam to Christ, contributes to the plan, and ultimately, through the covenants, we discover how all of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ.

### ***God's Covenant with Creation through Adam and Noah***

As noted above, the Bible begins with the creation of the world and of human beings, but it does so by first beginning with God as Creator and Lord ([Gen. 1-2](#); [Psa. 103:19](#); [Dan. 4:34-35](#); [Acts 17:24-25](#)). God's creation work is the outworking of his eternal plan in time ([Eph. 1:11](#); [Rev. 4:1](#)), which he directs to a specific *telos* or end. As history unfolds, God's plan is unpacked through specific covenantal relationships, which all lead us to Christ ([Col. 1:15-20](#)).

From [Genesis 1](#) on, God presents himself as the uncreated, independent, self-sufficient God who creates and rules all things by his word ([Gen 1-2](#); [Psa. 50:12-14](#); [Acts 17:24-25](#); cf. [John 1:1](#)). As Creator and Lord, God is fully present and related to his creatures: he freely, powerfully, and purposefully sustains and governs all things to his desired end ([Psa. 139:1-10](#); [Acts 17:28](#); [Eph. 1:11](#)). As personal, God commands, loves, comforts, and judges consistent with himself. Indeed, as we move through redemptive history, God discloses himself not merely as uni-personal but as tri-personal, a being-in-relation: Father, Son, and Spirit.

God is also the Holy One ([Gen. 2:1-3](#); [Ex. 3:2-5](#); [Lev. 11:44](#); [Isa. 6:1-3](#); cf. [Rom. 1:18-23](#)). God's holiness is associated with his independence and aseity ("life from himself"). As God he is self-existent and self-justifying as the moral standard of the universe. He is "too pure to behold evil" and unable to tolerate wrong ([Hab. 1:12-13](#); cf. [Isa. 1:4-20](#); [35:8](#)). God *must* act with holy justice when his people rebel against him; yet he is the God who loves his people with a holy, covenant love ([Hos. 11:9](#)). God's holiness and love are never at odds ([1Jn. 4:8](#); [Rev. 4:8](#)). Yet, as sin enters the world, and God graciously promises to redeem us, a question arises as to how he will do so and remain true to himself—a question central to the Bible's unfolding story.

Next, we are introduced to Adam, the first man, who is the representative head of humanity and of creation. Scripture divides all humans under two representative heads: Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1Cor. 15:12-28). In God's plan, Adam is a type of Christ, who anticipates the last Adam (Rom. 5:14). But Adam, sadly, by his representative act of disobedience, plunged *all* people into sin, with consequences for the entire creation. Yet, according to God's promise (Gen. 3:15), a "son/seed" will undo the curse of sin on the world and restore humanity to God.

Yet, in this promise, a question arises as to who this "seed" will be? After all, given God's holiness, how can fallen humans be justified *before him*? God *cannot* overlook our sin; *he* must remain true to his own righteous demand against sin. But how can God remain just *and* the justifier of the ungodly? In Scripture, this is *the* major question that drives the Bible's story. God *must* judge human sin, *but* given his promise to redeem, a *tension* is created in the Bible's covenantal relationships. God promises to be our God, and for us to dwell in his presence, but he is holy and we are not. No doubt, in the later covenants God initiates and provides various means to deal with sin (e.g., the priesthood, sacrificial system, tabernacle-temple [Lev. 17:11]). But under the Mosaic covenant, it was intended to never be enough. God was teaching his people about its built-in limitations that pointed beyond itself for a greater provision and covenant. As God's plan unfolds, the only way to resolve this *tension* is by the provision of a specific son—one who is *human* and the *divine Son*. He alone is able to redeem and justify us (Rom. 3:21-26). But this is to anticipate what is still to come.

In Noah, we also see God's creation purposes continue. When God judged the world with a flood, he saved Noah, his family, and two of every creature. Noah and his family were a "restart" on creation. As God commanded Adam before him, Noah was to fill the earth and rule over it. When God made a covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:13), it was a *reaffirmation* of the foundational covenant with Adam and creation. Yet, the Noahic covenant is established in the context of a fallen world reserved for judgment. Because of God's promise, we know that God will preserve creation until the end of time, despite ongoing human sin, and he will bring forth the promised seed through Noah, who will reverse all the effects of Adam's sin.

### ***God's Covenant with Abraham and his Children***

As Noah's children multiplied, they lived just like their ancestors, carrying on humanity's sinful rebellion. The Tower at Babel is evidence that humanity's Adam-like, God-defying ambition continues. Sin is passed on from generation to generation, and we wonder how God will reverse the effects of sin and death and restore us to our image-bearing role.

The answer is the Abrahamic covenant. Set in the context of Genesis 1-11, the Abrahamic covenant is how God will fulfill his promise to redeem and restore. Through *one family*, Abraham and his seed, God will keep his promise to reverse the effects of sin and death. By sovereign grace—not according to what Abraham did or any special about him—God chose Abraham, an idol worshipper, and promised to bless him with a great name, land, and offspring to bring salvation to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3; cf. Josh. 24:2-4). Through the Abrahamic covenant, God clarifies further how his saving promise will take place. In its inauguration in Genesis 15, God demonstrates that *he* alone will keep his promise to save. God's promises rely on his being true to his Word, which Abraham received by faith alone (Gen. 15:6).

In Eden, God banished Adam from his presence. Now Abraham's children, identified as those who trust and obey God, will be God's people, restored to his presence, and re-made to fulfill God's intent for humans.

### ***God's Covenant with Israel through Moses***

Abraham's descendants multiplied into the nation of Israel. As the story continues, God makes a further agreement with them. In God's covenant with Israel, mediated by Moses, God's promise is now focused on an entire *nation*—a holy nation and a kingdom of priests who are to be God's son (Exod. 4:22; 9:6). God delivered his people out of Egypt by the exodus, which established Israel as God's covenant people *and* served as a paradigm for God's saving acts to follow.

At Sinai, God gives his covenant law to Israel (Exod. 19-20). Moses serves as the mediator of the covenant, and God outlines his plans for the nation. These plans include the key roles of prophets, priests, and kings, each role touching on an aspect of Adam's original role in Eden. Again, we see that God's covenant with Israel builds on the previous covenants, continuing to unfold God's one redemptive plan and his original purposes for us. God's covenant includes within it blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, and it is through her obedience that Israel would experience the blessings of God.

Over time, while Israel sometimes obeys, the pattern of her life is largely disobedience. Despite her special calling, Israel acts just like Adam in her rebellion and rejection of God. As such, the old covenant, although given by God, points to something greater. In itself it was insufficient; it foreshadowed what was necessary to save us, but it did not provide it in full.

In God's plan, we discover that God, in various ways, intended for this covenant to point forward to Christ and the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). In God's plan, Israel's covenant was intended to be temporary as part of God's unfolding plan through the covenants. It graciously allowed God to dwell in Israel's midst, but it also revealed the need for a greater covenant, mediator, and sacrifice. The old covenant served a number of purposes: it revealed the nature of sin (Rom. 7:13), it unveiled the greatness of God's grace, and it anticipated the righteous of God in the gospel (Rom. 3:21) as it served as a guardian to lead us to Christ (Gal. 3:19-4:7).

### ***God's Covenant with David and his Son***

Through the Davidic covenant, God's promise is now focused on an *individual*: the king. The previous covenants are now brought to a head in this covenant, as God promised a "son/king" who would rule the world forever (2Sam. 7:14, 19).

In this "son" promise, we hear echoes of Israel as God's son (Exod. 4:22). Even more: we hear echoes of God's promise to provide a "son/seed" who will undo Adam's work (Gen. 3:15). Central to God's redemptive plan is the restoration of humanity's vice-regent role via the seed. By the time we get to David, we now know it's through the Davidic king that creation will be restored, which is clearly taught in the Prophets and Psalter (Psa. 2, 8, 45, 72; Isa. 9:6-7; 11, 53). Yet David and his sons disobey, thus leaving God's salvation promises in question. But God promises to bring forth a promised one—a Davidic king—but where is the king?

This leads to the message of the Prophets *and* the anticipation of a new covenant. The Prophets speak of God's judgment on Israel for her violation of the covenant, but they also give a word of hope. They announce an overall pattern of renewal by recapitulating the past history of redemption and projecting it into the future. The Prophets proclaim that God will keep his promise to redeem *and* he will do so through a faithful Davidic king (Isa. 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-10; 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 55:3; 61:1-3; Jer. 23:5-6; Ezek. 34:23-24). In this king, identified as the "servant of YHWH," a new/everlasting covenant will come with the pouring out of the Spirit (Ezek. 36-37; Joel 2:28-32), God's saving reign among the nations, the forgiveness of sin (Jer. 31:34) and a new creation (Isa. 65:17). The hope of the Prophets is found in the new covenant.

Regarding the new covenant, all of the Prophets teach about it, but [Jeremiah 31](#) is probably the most famous of the OT texts. Jeremiah focuses on what is central and foundational to the new covenant: the promise of the complete forgiveness of sin (31:34). Under Israel's covenant, the forgiveness of sin was granted through the sacrificial system. Yet, God never intended for the old system to be an end in itself ([Gal. 3-4](#)), which is evident by God's announcement that in the new covenant sin will be "remembered no more" (v. 34). What, then, is anticipated under the new covenant is a restoration of fellowship with God, and God's dwelling with us in a new creation—ultimately the fulfillment of [Genesis 3:15](#).

### *God's New Covenant in Christ*

The question of the OT is when and how God will honor his promises, his covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. With Christ's coming, *all* of God's promises are "yes" in him ([2Cor. 1:20](#)). As God planned from eternity, through the new covenant established by our Lord Jesus, our triune God inaugurates his saving kingdom in the world. In his incarnation, the divine Son becomes the promised human son, Abraham's seed, the true Israel, and David's greater Son, and he achieves our redemption by his work. By Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, *he* pays for our sin, remakes us as his new creation, and removes the curse of sin on creation. In Christ alone, all of God's promises are fulfilled and the original purpose of our creation is now accomplished forever.

These glorious truths are beautifully pictured in [Revelation 21-22](#). After final judgment on sin is enacted, the new creation comes in all of its consummated fullness. In Christ's return, the new creation comes in its consummated fullness so that the entire creation is where the triune God in all of his glory manifests his unique covenantal presence with us. Eden has given way to the new creation and what God created for us in the first place, namely, to dwell in his presence as his people, is now fully and finally realized now forevermore, amen!

The Bible, as God's Word written, is centrally about what our glorious triune God has done to glorify himself by the redemption of his people, the judgment of sin, and making all things new in Christ. For the church, such a message is good news, which ought to move us to faith, hope, love, and faithfulness to Christ. But the Bible's message also reminds us that outside of Christ is only final judgment, which ought to move us to faithful gospel proclamation.

## **FURTHER READING**

- T. D. Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).
- Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).
- Chris Bruno, *The Whole Message of the Bible in 16 Words* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).
- Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003).
- Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).
- Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002).
- Stephen Wellum and Trent Hunter, *Christ from Beginning to End* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

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