

# **THE MESSAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**P R O M I S E S   M A D E**

**MARK DEVER**

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# THE WHOLE BIBLE: WHAT DOES GOD WANT OF US?

## THE BIG PICTURE<sup>1</sup>

The Bible has been the subject of numerous and varying opinions.

Many people have not liked it. The great French philosopher Voltaire predicted the Bible would vanish within a hundred years. He said that more than two hundred years ago—in the eighteenth century. His kind of skepticism may have been rare when he lived, but it became more commonplace in the following century. One historian writes, “By the nineteenth century Westerners were already more certain that atoms exist than they were confident of any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of.”<sup>2</sup> By the twentieth century, great sections of the formerly “Christian” parts of the world had fallen into official skepticism about the Bible. *A Dictionary of Foreign Words*, published by the Soviet government about fifty years ago, defined the Bible as, “A collection of different legends, mutually contradictory and written at different times and full of historical errors, issued by churches as a ‘holy’ book.”

At the same time, many people have had a very high opinion of the Bible. Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century, described the Bible beautifully when he said, “As in paradise, God walks in the Holy Scriptures seeking man.” Immanuel Kant once stated, “A single line in the Bible has consoled me more than all the books I have ever read.” Daniel Webster said of it, “I pity the man who cannot find in it a rich supply of thought and of rules for conduct.” Abraham Lincoln called it, “the best gift God has given to man.” He also claimed, “But for it we could not know right from wrong.” Theodore Roosevelt said, “A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.” Certainly one of the most profound understandings of the Bible comes from the great Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, who attested, “Give a man an open Bible, an open mind, a conscience in good working order, and he will have a hard time to keep from being a Baptist.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally preached on January 9, 2000, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> Huston Smith, “Postmodernism and the World’s Religion,” in Walter Truett Anderson, ed., *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Everett Gill, *A. T. Robertson: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 181.

Some people believe they have great faith in the Bible, yet their sincerity is no guarantee of understanding. King Menelik II, the emperor of Ethiopia a hundred years ago, had great faith in the Bible. Whenever he felt sick, he ripped a few pages from the holy book and ate them! This was his regular practice, and it never did seem to harm him. He was recovering from a stroke in December 1913, when he began to feel particularly sick. He asked an aide to tear out the complete books of 1 and 2 Kings and feed them to him page by page. He died before he could eat both books.

Whether you like the Bible or not, it has certainly been popular. It is an all-time best-seller. Polls show that Americans generally say they believe the Bible.

Yet the book is probably more purchased than read. Most Americans may not have the gastronomic fervor of King Menelik, which is just fine; but they may also have less knowledge of the Bible than he did. Pollster George Gallup reports, "Americans revere the Bible, but they don't read it. And because they don't read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates. Four Americans in five believe the Bible is the literal or inspired Word of God, and yet only 4 in 10 could tell you that it was Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount and fewer than half can name the Four Gospels. . . . The cycle of biblical illiteracy seems likely to continue—today's teenagers know even less about the Bible than do adults. The celebration of Easter . . . is central to the faith, yet 3 teenagers in 10—20% of regular churchgoing teens—do not even know why Easter is celebrated. The decline in Bible reading is due in part to the widely held conviction that the Bible is inaccessible and less emphasis on religious training in the churches."<sup>4</sup>

It is exactly such ignorance we hope to help remove with this study. You or I may not be able to learn everything about Christianity in one fell swoop. In fact, I am certain we cannot. But I do hope to bring your attention to the overarching theme of the Bible as well as the basic message of Christianity, or what is called "the gospel."

Many people are surprised to hear that the Bible has any sort of overarching theme. It is well-known as a collection of books. As one Bible scholar put it,

No less than sixty-six separate books, one of which consists itself of one hundred and fifty separate compositions, immediately stare us in the face. These treatises come from the hands of at least thirty distinct writers, scattered over a period of some fifteen hundred years, and embrace specimens of nearly every

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<sup>4</sup> Cited by Michael S. Horton, "Recovering the Plumb Line," in John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 259.

kind of writing known among men. Histories, codes of law, ethical maxims, philosophical treatises, discourses, dramas, songs, hymns, epics, biographies, letters both official and personal, vaticinations . . .

Their writers, too, were of like diverse kinds. The time of their labors stretches from the hoary past of Egypt to and beyond the bright splendor of Rome under Augustus. . . .

We may look, however, on a still greater wonder. Let us once penetrate beneath all this primal diversity and observe the internal character of the volume, and a most striking unity is found to pervade the whole. . . . The parts are so linked together that the absence of any one book would introduce confusion and disorder. The same doctrine is taught from beginning to end. . . . Each book, indeed, adds something in clearness, definition, or even increment, to what the others proclaim. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, the Bible is made up of many parts. Yet this book is one whole: “utter diversity in origin of these books, and yet utter nicety of combination of one with all.”<sup>6</sup>

Have you heard of the *Above* series of large coffee-table photography books? There is *Above Washington* and *Above London* and *Above Europe* and many others. I enjoy the series because of the sweeping panoramas it provides. The plans of the original city planners, hidden when walking down the streets with building tops high overhead, suddenly become visible as the pictures let us rise up and look down on the whole. The aerial photographs provide a sense of perspective and interrelatedness, and we see what the planners envisioned in their minds and blueprints. Clearly, the sense of the whole is important for understanding and for planning. Some people suggest the ecology movement did not begin until the first pictures of the whole earth, taken from space, were published around 1970. Wasn't it on the cover of the old *Whole Earth Catalog*? Seeing a photograph of the earth, I think, jelled our understanding of the world as a whole and galvanized certain individuals to action. In the same way, we want in this sermon to pull up and get an “Above the Bible” or “Whole Bible” view all at once.

Or we might consider the concept of time-lapse photography. In time-lapse photography, the photographer positions the camera to take a shot of the same location multiple times over the course of a day. That allows him to see the changes that occur in one place over a long period of time in just a few moments of flipping through pictures. Reading through the Bible has the same effect. The Bible is of course much briefer than what it records. I know it would take you

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<sup>5</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Divine Origin of the Bible,” in *Revelation and Inspiration*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 436, 437.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

a long time to read it, but it would take you much less time to read it than it took to write it; and it took less time to write it than it took for the events to happen. So the text of Scripture itself is already like a time-lapsed series of photographs, and in the course of this study we will try to flip through an even more condensed series of pictures that present the message of the whole.

The story line we will follow, and the outline of this study, is the story of *promises made* and *promises kept*. God makes promises to his people in the Old Testament, and he keeps his promises in the New Testament. This message of promises made and promises kept is the most important message in all the world, including for you. Maybe you will “get it” in this study. Or maybe it will get you. As Martin Luther said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me.” I pray that happens to you.

Before we continue, let me mention several good resources for helping you understand the Bible further. First, J. I. Packer’s *God Has Spoken*<sup>7</sup> will help you understand why you should study and read the Bible as a Christian. Second, whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian, Chris Wright has written a great little book called *User’s Guide to the Bible*<sup>8</sup> that will help you know what the Bible contains. It has pictures and timelines and bright colors, and it is so very thin! It is a wonderful resource. Finally, Graeme Goldsworthy’s little *Gospel and Kingdom*, which comprises the first of three works in his *Goldsworthy Trilogy*,<sup>9</sup> is one of the best treatments of the story line of the whole Bible. In all of Scripture, Goldsworthy contends, God is bringing *his* people into *his* place under *his* rule.

## PROMISES MADE: THE MESSAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Not everyone who reads the Bible regards it as one whole. Some ignore the Old Testament. Toward the close of the second century, the followers of a man named Marcion rejected the Old Testament, even though the Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus and the apostles. Marcion and his followers also cut everything out of the New Testament except Luke and ten of Paul’s epistles. Though Christians quickly and universally rejected this radical surgery, the Old Testament too often suffers a similar fate in evangelical circles today. No one says what Marcion said, but the effect is the same: the Old Testament is ignored. We may mine it for good stories about Joseph, David, or Moses. Perhaps we look for good examples of bravery or devotion for our children to

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Chris Wright, *User’s Guide to the Bible* (Belleville, Mich.: Lion, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1981); *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 2000).

emulate. Maybe we sentimentalize a few of our favorite psalms and proverbs. But on the whole, we ignore it. Is it just laziness?

If you are a Christian, you surely know of God's wonderful revelation of himself in Christ as recorded in the New Testament. Yet if you ignore the Old Testament, you ignore the basis and foundation of the New. The context for understanding the person and work of Christ is the Old Testament. God's work of creation, humanity's rebellion against him, sin's consequence in death, God's election of a particular people, his revelation of sin through the law, the history of his people, his work among other peoples—I could go on and on—all these form the setting for Christ's coming. Christ came in history at a particular point in the story line. So the parables taught by Jesus often refer back to the story line begun in Genesis. His verbal battles with the Pharisees are rooted in differences over the meaning of the law. And the epistles build upon the Old Testament again and again. Understanding God's purpose in history, understanding the story line, requires us to begin at the beginning. If we can better understand the Old Testament, we will have gone a long way toward better understanding the New Testament and, therefore, better understanding Jesus Christ, Christianity, God, and ourselves. Within the Old Testament, we will first consider a *particular history*. Second, we will consider God's *passion for holiness*. Third, we will observe the Old Testament's *promise of hope*.

### *A Particular History*

Our text begins, not surprisingly, on page 1 of your Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). That is where the story line of a particular history begins. The Bible is not only a book of wise religious counsel and theological propositions, though it has both. It is a story, a real story set in real history. It is a historical saga—an epic. And the story in the Old Testament is amazing!

In this very first verse, the story begins with the greatest event in world history. You have nothing, and then all of a sudden you have something.

But keep reading; there is more! You have inanimate creation, and then all of a sudden you have life.

You have creatures, and then you have man made in God's image.

You have the Garden of Eden, and then you have the Fall.

And all this occurs in the first three chapters of the Bible. Some people have called the third chapter of Genesis, where Adam and Eve sin in the Garden, the most important chapter for understanding the whole Bible. Cut out Genesis 3, and the rest of the Bible would be meaningless.

After Adam and Eve's sin, Cain kills his brother Abel. Humankind further



degenerates for a number of generations. And God finally judges the world with a flood, saving just one righteous man—Noah—and his family. The generations following Noah fare no better. Humankind rebels at the Tower of Babel; this time God disperses everyone over the face of the earth. A new beginning is then promised as God shows his faithfulness to another particular person, Abraham, and his family. After a brief period of prosperity, Abraham's descendents, now called Israel, fall into slavery in Egypt. Then the Exodus occurs, in which Moses leads the people out of Egypt. God gives Israel the law. The people enter the Promised Land. They are ruled by a series of judges for a short time. A kingdom is established, with kings David and David's son Solomon representing the pinnacle. Solomon builds the temple, which houses the ark of the covenant and functions as the center of Israel's worship of Yahweh. Shortly after Solomon's death, the kingdom divides between Israel and Judah—the northern and southern kingdoms. Idolatry grows in Israel until the Assyrians destroy the northern kingdom. Judah then deteriorates until it is destroyed by Babylon. Survivors are carried off to exile in Babylon, where they remain for seventy years. A remnant then returns to Jerusalem and rebuilds the temple, yet Israel never regains the glory it knew under David and Solomon. And that is the whole history of the Old Testament!

If you turn to the table of contents in your Bible, you can see that this story line is not recounted in just one book but in thirty-nine smaller books. These books, which together make up the Old Testament, are quite different from one another. Genesis through Deuteronomy, the first five books, is called the Pentateuch or the five books of the Law. Following these five are twelve books called the histories—Joshua through Esther. Taken together, these seventeen books chronicle the narrative from Creation to the exiles' return, and they conclude about four hundred years before Christ. All seventeen books, one after the other, are fairly chronological.

The five books that follow the historical narrative books in your table of contents—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs—focus on some of the more personal experiences of the people of God. These books are largely collections taken from throughout this Old Testament period of wisdom literature, devotional poems, and ceremonial literature from the Temple.

Following Song of Songs, you will see in the table of contents a series of seventeen books, beginning with Isaiah and ending with Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. These are the prophets. If the first seventeen books follow Israel's history, and the middle group describes individual experiences within that history, this last group provides God's own commentary on the history. The books of prophecy are, as it were, God's authoritative editorials.

So the Old Testament as a whole provides one very clear and concrete rev-

elation of God to his people, given through a variety of authors and genres over a long stretch of time. And what a tremendous way God has chosen to reveal himself to us. If you have ever been in a position to hire someone, you know what it is like to get a one-page résumé that attempts to sum up an individual. And you know how unsatisfying a one-page summary is for knowing an individual and making an important decision. Meeting and interacting with someone in person is much more revealing. Well, in the Old Testament, God provides us far more than a flat résumé. He gives us an account of how he worked with his people over the ages. We see how he treated them. We see how they responded to him. We see what he is like. And that brings us to the second thing for us to notice about the Old Testament if we want to understand the message of the Bible.

### *A Passion for Holiness*

The Old Testament presents us not only with the *particular history* of Israel; it introduces us to God's *passion for holiness*.

A lot of people associate the Old Testament with an angry God. They even think of this Old Testament God as unjust. But nothing could be further from the truth! When God becomes angry in the Old Testament, you can be sure it is not whimsical tyranny. He is committed to his own holy and glorious character, and he is committed to his covenant with his people. Sin, the culprit that stirs up God's anger, robs God of glory and breaks his covenant with his people.<sup>10</sup>

What is meant by this language of "covenant"? Christians refer to a "covenant" when they gather at the Lord's Supper and recall Jesus' words, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Jesus' language of covenant is not cold or legal, as some might think; he takes it from the Old Testament language for relationship-making. A covenant is a relational commitment of trust, love, and care, and God makes a number of covenants with his people in the Old Testament—with Abraham, Moses, and others. God's passion for holiness becomes most evident when his people break the terms of their covenantal relationship with him, terms that are defined by the Mosaic Law and that accord with his own holy character. So we can define sin as law-breaking, but we also know that law-breaking means covenant-breaking, relationship-breaking, and—at the deepest level—"God's holiness-defying." So does the Old Testament present us with an angry God? Yes, but it is a God who is angry exactly because he is not indifferent to sin and the incredible pain and suffering it causes.

Like the New Testament, the Old Testament teaches that every man and

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<sup>10</sup> Hab. 1:13; Isa. 59:2; Prov. 15:29; also Col. 1:21; Heb. 10:27.

woman is a sinner, and that no one can deal with this by himself or herself.<sup>11</sup> Sin requires some kind of reparation. But how can reparation occur? God is holy, and justice can be restored only, it would seem, when God justly condemns the person who has wickedly broken his law (the terms of his covenant with Moses). So the sinner must be condemned! Or—and here is our only hope—some type of atonement must be made.

What is atonement? Our English word “atonement,” Anglo-Saxon in origin, is a great picture of what the word means—*at-one-ment*. An offering of atonement enables two warring parties to be *at one*, or reconciled. The people of Israel were not the only people in the ancient Near Eastern world who knew they needed atonement before God; the idea of placating a deity was common, yet only the Old Testament places the idea of atonement within the context of a genuine covenantal relationship between God and man.

Atonement in the Old Testament is unique in another way. As in many cultures, it is linked with sacrifice. But in the Bible, a sacrifice of atonement does not depend on human initiative, such as some pitiful attempt to propitiate a volcano god by dropping a beloved object into the fire. In the Old Testament, the living God speaks, and he tells his people how to approach him. He takes the initiative in providing the way of reconciliation.

Sacrifice is not the only image the Old Testament uses to describe atonement,<sup>12</sup> but it does play a central role from the beginning. Immediately after the Fall, Cain and Abel offer sacrifices (Gen. 4:3-4). Before leaving Egypt, the Israelites are commanded to slaughter a Passover Lamb without defect and paint its blood on the doors of their houses (Exodus 12). The lamb’s blood causes the Spirit of God to *pass over* a house, sparing the life of a family’s first-born (who represents the whole family) from God’s just punishment of sin. In all of this, God very clearly is the object of the sacrificial event. Sacrifices are done to satisfy him and his just requirements. So God says to Moses, “when I see the blood . . .” (Ex. 12:13).

The book of Leviticus played a large role in teaching the Israelite people that their relationship with God needed to be restored through a sacrifice. Every sacrifice was to be voluntary, costly, accompanied by a confession of sin, and according to God’s prescriptions. The life of the animal victim, symbolized by its blood, was given in exchange for the life of the guilty human worshiper. What does some animal have to do with an individual’s guilt? In one sense, nothing. In fact, the animal was supposed to be unblemished.<sup>13</sup> Yet

<sup>11</sup> 1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 14:3; Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20; also Mark 10:18; Rom. 3:23.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Isaiah uses the images of a hot coal that purges unclean lips (Isa. 6:6-7); Hosea describes the purchase of an offender (Hos. 3:2-3); Zechariah refers to the removing of filthy clothes (Zech. 3:4).

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28.

atonement had to be made through blood.<sup>14</sup> God tells the people that “the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Lev. 17:11). God used the sacrificial act to implant in his people’s minds the image of an innocent life being given in exchange for guilty lives. The shed blood plainly revealed that sin causes death. Sin is costly. Salvation and forgiveness are costly. Now, I know the whole idea of sacrifices and all that blood is unpopular—to say the least!—among many people today. Still, this is how the Old Testament shows God’s holiness and his wrath against sin. Unlike other ancient sacrifices, biblical sacrifices were not made by the grateful so much as by the guilty; they were not made by the ignorant so much as by the instructed.

The design of the Old Testament temple was also used to teach the people that their sin separated them from God. In the back of your Bible you might find a diagram of the temple, which shows that it was designed as a series of concentric squares and rectangles. The worshipers on the outside were separated from God in the innermost square, called the Most Holy Place. The temple’s design physically demonstrated that sin hinders access to God. It was a visual picture of how sin separates humans from their Creator. Aside from the sacrifices that occurred throughout the year in the outer court, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year to offer a sacrifice for all the people (Leviticus 16). This was the Day of Atonement.

Yet the mere fact that the sacrifices had to be repeated annually showed that the sacrifices, in and of themselves, were never the point.<sup>15</sup> Their repetition showed instead that the people were in a state of sin, and that no perfect and complete sacrifice could take away sin entirely. Sacrifices were most efficacious, ironically, when they were made with the understanding that they were *not* efficacious and that only God’s grace saves. But notice the problem here. If the sacrifices were not finally effective for the removing of sin, how could God’s grace justly save?

Here we come to the riddle of the Old Testament. In Exodus 34, God refers to himself by saying, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished” (34:6-7). Now how can that be? How can God “forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin” and yet “not leave the guilty unpunished”?

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<sup>14</sup> E.g., Gen. 9:5; Lev. 1:4; 4:4; 14:51; 16:21.

<sup>15</sup> As you can tell if you read Jeremiah’s denunciations of them in Jeremiah 7.

That brings us to the last thing we need to understand about the Old Testament and the God it reveals.

### *A Promise of Hope*

The Old Testament does not portray God as an uncaring dispenser of grim condemnation. Yes, he is holy, just, and unwavering in his commitment to punish sin, as he is in the New Testament. But the God of the Old Testament is also a God of love, even toward his enemies. He is the “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6). Love is not a uniquely Christian thing; it is a biblical thing.

The Old Testament enjoins love in many places. For instance, what Jesus will eventually call the greatest command is first given to Israel: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5). The second command that follows from the first comes from the Old Testament as well: “Love him [a foreigner living among you] as yourself” (Lev. 19:34). And the pattern for how Israel should love is how God himself loves: “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (Deut. 10:18-19). Since God loves his enemies, his people must do the same. Proverbs 24 commands, “Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice” (24:17). And Proverbs 25 teaches, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (25:21). The God of the Old Testament is a God of love.

When we consider the whole sweep of Old Testament history, and observe God’s patience toward those who have declared themselves his enemies through disobedience, we see a God of unspeakable love and forbearance. He did not have to let human history continue after the Fall in the Garden. He did not have to persevere with the wayward nation of Israel. Yet we watch his grace, love, mercy, and patience on an epic scale—stretched out across the history of a people. It almost looks as if God planned to use history to reveal his glory to his people. And in fact, he did.

Understanding the Old Testament, as I said, requires understanding its promise of hope. What hope? We have talked plenty about God’s commitment to holiness and the failure of his people to live up to the requirements of holiness. And we have considered God’s promise to punish the wicked (in Exodus 34). So what hope could sinners have? Their hope was not in their history. The history of the Old Testament proved them (and us) to be moral and spiritual failures. Nor was their hope finally in the sacrificial system. As the psalmist

said, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,”<sup>16</sup> at least not without something even more basic. How then could the hope held out in Exodus 34:6-7 be true? How could God “forgive wickedness” and still “not leave the guilty unpunished”? If the answer was not in the Old Testament people themselves or in their own history, it was in God and his promise, particularly in God’s *promised person*. As we have seen, blood must be shed in order to assuage the righteous wrath of God against sin. Justice demands that sin be paid for either by the guilty party himself or herself *or* by an innocent substitute who bears the suffering and death on behalf of the guilty party. Furthermore, the punishment of a substitute requires some sort of relation between the guilty one and the one being offered as the sacrifice. But where would a perfect substitute be found?

Sources from the first century suggest that Messianic hope and expectation were prominent at the time of Jesus’ birth. People did not wonder if the Messiah would come. They took it for granted that their only hope lay with a specially anointed one of God—the Messiah. Why? The Old Testament is filled with the promise of a coming person. God’s people waited for the prophet God promised to Moses (Deut. 18:15-19). They waited for the king and, perhaps, the suffering servant (Isa. 9:6; 11:1-5; 53). They waited for the son of man coming on the clouds seen by Daniel (Dan. 7:13).

These promises point toward the answer to the Old Testament riddle. And these promises are the hope of the Old Testament. More than anything else, in fact, the Old Testament teaches us that these promises offer us our only hope.

## **PROMISES KEPT: THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

I wonder what you have your hopes set on. This is a crucial question for both you and me to answer. Many, even most, of our problems come from attaching our hopes to things that were not made to bear them—things that will sink like stones in water and pull us down with them. Some things even hold out great promise in the beginning but eventually prove to be passing fancies, or worse. In this old world, it is not only in politics where promises made are not necessarily promises kept.

So we must turn to God. He made us and knows us. He knows where our hopes should be placed. He has set before us in the Old Testament the very

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<sup>16</sup> Ps. 40:6. The psalmist, among other Old Testament writers, seemed to share the insight of the New Testament writer to the Hebrews, who wrote, “The Law . . . can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:1-4).

promises upon which we should set our hope. And we look to the New Testament to find the fulfillment of those promises.

The nation of Israel had waxed and waned for almost two millennia until their hopes almost vanished. Even after their release from Babylonian exile, only several hundred years passed before another alien invader crushed them—the mighty Roman Empire. Feelings of disappointment verged on despair. What about all their old hopes? Would their deliverer never come? Would fellowship with God never be restored? Would the world never be put right? God had promised his people all these things.

And God delivered on his promises. The New Testament is the story of how all the promises God made in the Old Testament, God kept.

In order to understand the New Testament, we will look first at Christ, then at God's covenant people, and finally at the renewal of all creation. You might be helped by thinking of these three themes as three concentric circles. We begin with the heart of the matter and move outward. In all of this, we find that God has penetrated human history and has worked for his own purposes.

### *The Promised Redeemer: Christ*

First, would Israel's deliverer ever come? The New Testament answers this Old Testament promise with a resounding yes! In fact, the one who fulfills this promise is the very center of the New Testament: Jesus Christ.

The New Testament teaches that God planned before history began to send Christ. Adam and Eve rebelled against God's rightful rule in the Garden, and God's people rebelled continuously over millennia. Yet God's plan remained in place through everything. An anointed deliverer would come—a Messiah (Hebrew) or a Christ (Greek). And he would come from a tattered remnant of Israel living amid Roman occupation.

The collection of twenty-seven books that comprise the New Testament begins by directly addressing this promise with four accounts of the life of the Messiah. The four documentaries of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all argue that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. He is the promised one for whom God's people have been waiting. Where Adam and Israel failed, Jesus was faithful. As did his predecessors, he faced Satan's temptations. Yet he survived them without sin. He is the prophet promised by Moses, the king prefigured by David, and the divine Son of Man promised by Daniel. In fact, Jesus is the very Word of God made flesh (John 1:1, 14).

Following these first four, the next book in the New Testament, Acts, shows how Jesus continues to be active in the world as his church expands to

all nations. Acts begins with Jesus' ascending to heaven and then giving out his Spirit at Pentecost. Over the ensuing chapters, his Spirit establishes the church as God's new society and empowers it to grow and to do Christ's work. The book concludes with Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

We see the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises to his people frequently in the book of Acts (e.g., 15:13-18), and this pattern is typical of the whole New Testament. Jesus is the new Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-47). Jesus is the righteous one (1 Pet. 3:18; Acts 3:14; 1 John 2:1). Jesus is greater than Moses (John 1:17; 5:45-46; Heb. 3:1-6) and greater than David (Matt. 22:41-45; Acts 2:29-36). Abraham, Jesus said, rejoiced to see his day (John 8:56-58). According to the New Testament, promises made in the Old Testament are promises kept in Jesus.

Indeed, Jesus Christ *is* the point of the Bible. It is all about him. If you wanted to sum up the Bible in one word, you could do so by pointing to Christ. The Old Testament makes promises about Christ, and the New Testament keeps promises in Christ.

We read the Bible because we love Christ, and we want to know more about his love for us. John Stott writes, "A man who loves his wife will love her letters and her photographs because they speak to him of her. So if we love the Lord Jesus we shall love the Bible because it speaks to us of him. The husband is not so stupid as to prefer his wife's letters to her voice, or her photographs to herself. He simply loves them because of her. So, too, we love the Bible because of Christ. It is his portrait. It is his love-letter."<sup>17</sup> There are cold religious legalists who fight for the Bible but who do not love the Lord described in its pages. The Bible shows us Christ so that we can look to him as the focus of our hopes and the center of our satisfaction. In him we find all the answers we need about God and his call on our lives. Christ is the promised deliverer not just for God's Old Testament people but for you and me as well.

### *The Promised Relationship: A New Covenant People*

This brings us to our second concentric circle for understanding the message of the New Testament: Christ came for a people. Because of sin, mankind, though created in the image of God, lost the ability to perfectly image God. Christ came and displayed that image once more. But not only that! He came to make a people for God, a special covenant people particularly called to reflect God's image to all creation. We have seen that the "covenant" language in the Bible is not cold, legal language, but relational language. We have also

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<sup>17</sup> John Stott, *Fundamentalism and Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1959), 41.



seen that Jesus Christ uses this sort of language of Christians when he offers us the “new covenant in my blood”—words we recall when we partake of the Lord’s Supper. This new covenant signifies the new relationship that we Christians, God’s people, have with God.

How did Christ accomplish this? At one point, Jesus says to his followers, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). He was standing in the temple at the time, but he did not mean the building; he meant himself. In the New Testament, Jesus himself *is* the new temple. He *is* the new meeting place for God and his people. He *is* the mediator. You see, Christ came not only to fulfill the Old Testament hope for Messiah as Prophet and King; he came to fulfill the hope for a Priest. Jesus our mediating priest grants us a new relationship with God by solving the riddle of the Old Testament: how can the Lord “forgive wickedness” and yet “not leave the guilty unpunished”? When Jesus was nailed to the cross, the guilt of all who would ever repent and put their trust in him *was* punished. He received that punishment! He stood in for the guilty, so that the guilty might be forgiven. After his resurrection, Jesus used the Old Testament to teach these lessons:

beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. . . .

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:27, 45-47).

Christ’s suffering provides a way for us his people to be forgiven, which is exactly what the LORD had promised through the prophet Isaiah:

Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4-6).

This is what Christ did! He was pierced. He was crushed. And he had our iniquities laid upon him. His own body provides the priestly sacrifice we need to stand in between God and us, so that we might be God's own people. As Jesus taught his disciples, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; cf. Gal. 4:4-5; Philippians 2).

In giving himself, Christ combined an amazing strength and humility. One of the best portrayals of this occurs in Revelation 5. The apostle John is told to look and see the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He turns to see the Lion, but what does he behold? A Lamb. The message is not that there are two gods; the message is that the Lion is the Lamb. The Lion of Judah has become the Lamb slain for our sins. This is the story of our great God. He has become our sacrificial lamb—our substitute. And by acting as our substitute, he has purchased us, his church, with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

So Christ is the answer to the Old Testament's riddle. And in Christ, the people are made holy. The very thing that God wanted of his people in the Old Testament, that he planned toward, that they never achieved on their own, God now has through Christ: a remnant, a nation, a people to praise him with lips and lives of holiness. He has a *new* covenant people who are genuinely holy in Christ.

When we open the New Testament, we find throughout its pages this all-important emphasis on salvation from sin to holiness. Paul tells the Ephesian Christians they have been saved (Eph. 2:8-9). He tells the Corinthian Christians they are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18). And he tells the Christians in Rome they shall be saved (Rom. 5:9). Christians are already counted as holy in Christ; we are being made holy even now; and someday, thanks to God, we will be holy in ourselves. The work of the kingdom of God has begun in us, and we look forward to its completion.

The New Testament paints the contrast between the world and the kingdom of God starkly. The world is marked by unbelief; the kingdom of God is marked by faith. The world is characterized by bondage and darkness; the covenant people of God enjoy freedom and light. The world knows only death; those belonging to the kingdom are promised eternal life. Hate and fear typify the first; love typifies the second. Apart from the covenant in Christ, our lives are marked by lawlessness. In Christ, we abide in God. The Scriptures have been given to the people of God so that they will perceive these contrasts, discover where salvation is found, and know what God's judgment will entail. So our own church's statement of faith (taken from the 1833 New Hampshire Confession) begins with the words,

*Of The Scriptures:* We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true centre of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.

Following after the Gospels, which focus on the identity of Jesus Christ, the rest of the New Testament helps define and fill out what it means for us to be the special covenant people of Christ. If you look back to the table of contents for the New Testament, you see the four Gospels. Then you see the book of Acts, which is really the transition from these Gospels to the books about living as God's people. In Acts, the gospel expands outward from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and, beginning with the three missionary journeys of Paul, to the ends of the world. After Acts you see a number of books that are letters, and these letters describe what it means to live as God's specially covenanted people.

Paul wrote the first thirteen of these letters. Originally a noted rabbi of the stricter sort of Jews, Paul was remarkably converted by God as he was traveling, in his words, to persecute some Christians "to their death" (Acts 22:4).

Following Paul's letters are eight more, written by James, Peter, John, Jude, and one unknown author (Hebrews). As we read through all of these letters, we find that the promises made by God in the Old Testament have been kept in God's new covenant people. You see, God has desired to show himself not merely in Christ but in a community of people who live and love one another in a manner that displays God's character to the world. If we are Christians, that is happening this very day in our churches!

As Christians, we often pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, KJV). Have you ever wondered what that means? Some people limit their hopes to those things they can achieve in their own strength. But Christianity has never been like that. As Christians, we have always put our hope in something that goes beyond what we can bring about by our own power. Peter writes in his second letter, "we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13). This *kingdom come*, this *new heaven* and *new earth*, this *home of righteousness*, points us to the fulfillment of our final and first hope: the whole world being put right. This is the third movement of God's plan in the New Testament as it extends from Christ to his covenant people to the outermost circle—his whole creation.

### *The Promised Renewal: A New Creation*

What is the point of history? Why do life and the universe and you and I exist at all? All history and all creation exist ultimately for God's glory. This is what we find at the conclusion of the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, written by the apostle John, all creation is taken up into God's glory.

I know the book of Revelation is sometimes the subject of sensationalistic documentaries with ominous music. But Revelation is actually a book of wonderful hope and encouragement for God's people. It presents the consummation of our salvation. We are finally in God's place, under his rule, and in a perfectly right relationship to him. The heavens and the earth are re-created, and the struggling *church militant* becomes the resting *church triumphant* (see Rev. 21:1-4; 21:22-22:5).

Some people get to Revelation and say, "This is just idealistic Greek Platonism." Or, "This is just another world-denying Gnosticism, as if only the invisible matters." But that is not what John presents us at all. In Revelation, creation is re-finished, refurbished, and re-presented in a new heaven and a new earth, all of which tends toward the great end of the Bible and world history—the glory of God himself. That is no Platonism or Gnosticism! As Christians, we do not merely believe in an eternal soul that ascends and lives with God in the clouds. We believe in a doctrine that was offensive to the ancient Greeks: the resurrection of the body. In a manner beyond our comprehension, God will one day reconstitute these presently rotting bodies of ours. Jesus' own resurrection was only the "firstfruits." It was the beginning of the great harvest to follow (1 Cor. 15:20). And his remaking of our bodies is a picture of what he will do with all creation.

The holiness of God's people will finally be complete, and we will dwell together with him. Really, Revelation presents the Garden of Eden restored, only better. Now it is a heavenly and perfect city, a city that works not because the sewers are good and the taxes are low but because God abides with his people. John describes the measurements of this heavenly city as a great cube. Any Christian who knows the Old Testament knows that John's vision harks back to the Most Holy Place. This special place within Israel's temple was itself a perfect cube and the most manifest location of God's presence on earth. Now, in this cube-shaped heavenly city, God's full, unmediated presence is given to all his people. The whole world becomes the temple. John writes, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will

be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

Since we know what this world is all about, we Christians have great news to offer. I remember sitting cross-legged one day in an undergraduate philosophy class at Duke University in a room with purple shag carpet on the floor, walls, and ceiling, lit by one dangling light bulb (I am dating myself quite clearly). The professor began the hour by asking the question, “What’s the purpose of life?” Well, nobody would say anything, because these days answering that kind of question sounds prideful. But I was a young Christian, and the silence was killing me. I remember thinking to myself that here were all these people made in the image of God, and I was not saying anything. So I finally blurted out, “The purpose of life is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever!” Christian friend, that is the purpose of life! We are not clueless about that fact. You may not know why you are in the job you are in. You may not know why you have the disease that you have. You may not know a lot of very significant things. But right now, you know the most significant thing in all the world: the purpose of life is to know God so that you may glorify him and enjoy him forever.

Presently, we live in a time of waiting, and for that reason the book of Revelation appropriately concludes the New Testament. It was written by an old man who had been left alone and deserted in exile. Everything this world values had been taken from him, and he was utterly desperate. Still, he was full of hope! And that is Christianity. We are to live filled with such hope. God has promised that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of his glory, and he will keep this promise in his new creation. Every promise made by God will be kept by God.

## CONCLUSION

We all know that some disappointments have their uses. The ruins of cherished plans are often the first steps to the true good that God has in store for us. The apostle Paul learned this when he asked God to remove the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9). God, in his great and strange mercy, said no. Nationalistic Israelites also learned this in how they were waiting for the Messiah. God had something better in his plans than the immediate political supremacy of Israel over her enemies.

And that is true in your life and mine. Neither you nor I have a life perfectly attuned to the will, desires, and hopes of God. So we will inevitably face disappointment. We will watch the things we fix our hopes upon sink like stones in water. And it is God’s grace to us that they do. As strange as it may seem, if we really believe the Bible, we must learn to trust that he knows what

he is doing, and that his plans for us are better than whatever we have planned for ourselves. So often we cling with all our might to what we have in this world. But God has something even better prepared for his children.

If you are a child of God through new birth in Christ, the conclusion God has in mind for you is unimaginably good! As John writes in one of his letters, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). And Paul dissolves into doxology when he thinks of what God has done and will do: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” (Rom. 11:33).

Of course, our minds are not always fixed on such lofty things. We are not always sitting in church or reading sermons about the whole Bible. Very often, our lives are consumed with other hopes, and we look for contentment amid smaller things. William Wilberforce was such a man. He thought he possessed everything a man could want. He was born into an old family in Yorkshire, England, in 1759. He grew up in great privilege, was given to ease, and had a wonderful wit. He did well in his undergraduate studies at Cambridge University, where he also befriended William Pitt, who very soon became the prime minister of England. Almost immediately upon his graduation from Cambridge in 1781, Wilberforce was elected to Parliament. He was very fashionable and quickly became prominent in London because of his close friendships with many important society and political leaders. He soon defined the “in” crowd and even in his early twenties held a position of considerable power and eminence. In the winter of 1784–1785, Wilberforce toured the south of France with several friends, among them Isaac Milner. On the trip, Wilberforce made frequent jibes at what he thought was the overheated piety of evangelical Christians. Unbeknownst to the witty Wilberforce, his traveling companion Milner was such a Christian. At one point, Wilberforce referred to one prominent evangelical leader by saying he was a good man but that he “carried things a bit too far.” Milner, who had not yet remonstrated his young friend, responded, “Not a bit too far.” He suggested that carefully perusing the whole New Testament might cause Wilberforce to form a different estimate of this man. Wilberforce, a little surprised at his friend’s forwardness, said he would. And he did! Over the next few weeks on that trip, God used the Bible to make William Wilberforce a new man. As he later told it, the Bible’s message about God and man, sin and Christ’s sacrifice, the forgiveness and new birth that can be ours through repentance and faith in Christ—all those things we have been talking about in this study—came alive to Wilberforce. He was born again. He changed from just another nameless wit haunting the environs

of London, always on the lookout for what benefited himself, to Wilberforce the Great Liberator, a man who committed his life to ending slavery in Britain. It took him decades of work, but he eventually managed to push bills through Parliament abolishing first the slave trade and then slavery itself. His life had been transformed. Wilberforce became the champion of liberty only after God had freed his own soul with the message of the Bible—with the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Bible is God’s revelation of himself to us. In the Old Testament and New, he reveals himself to us through the promises he makes and keeps. And then he calls us to respond to him in trust. In the 1813 Baptist Catechism, a variation of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 6 reads,

Q. What things are chiefly contained in the holy scriptures?

A. The holy scriptures chiefly contain what man ought to believe concerning God, and what duty God requireth of man (2 Tim. 1:13; 3:15-16).

Paul points to the same duty to believe when he writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16).

The question for you is, will you believe? Will you turn your life over to him? Will you trust him for what he says? We need that time-lapse camera sometimes to show us that God is faithful, because sometimes—if we are honest—it feels as if our prayers are not answered. So step back and look at what God does through the pages of Scripture. You will begin to see that he is faithful, just as he was to Abraham when he called him to an unfamiliar land. Abraham did not understand everything God was doing; yet he believed God and followed his instructions. And God blessed him. He gave Abraham the gift of faith so that Abraham could come to know him.

God gives us the promises in his Word as well, and we are called to respond in trust to them. Unlike Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and much like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we must hear and believe God’s Word. When we do, we will be restored to the relationship with God for which we were made.

This is the hope in which we can trust, because this is the hope that will not disappoint. And this is the chief concern of the whole Bible, Old Testament and New: God’s restored relationship with his people for his own glory and his own pleasure.

***Let us pray:***

*Lord God, we invariably come into your presence with lesser aims than you have for us. Yet we pray that you would take the great story of your revelation*

*of yourself in your Word and speak it into our hearts. We pray that you would give your Word a tongue that we can hear, as well as hands that hold us and feet that pursue us. Lord, be tenacious in your love for us, as you have been throughout your history of dealing with your people. We pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. As we considered at the beginning, the Bible has been the subject of numerous and varying opinions. What are several of the most prominent opinions of the Bible that people have today?
2. If the Bible is comprised of 66 different books and has more than 30 different human authors, how could it possibly have one overarching story line and one message?
3. What are some of the advantages of examining the whole Bible and its message in one fell swoop?
4. We have observed that the Bible is not only a book of wise religious counsel and theological propositions, though it has both. It is a story, a real story set in real history. Why do you think God might have revealed himself within a historical narrative? What advantages does that give us as readers?
5. What is atonement? How does the Old Testament link atonement and sacrifice? Were the sacrifices of the Old Testament *effective* in reconciling man to God?
6. What is the “riddle” of the Old Testament?
7. Suppose a Christian friend told you that he struggles with the God of the Old Testament because he just seems so angry and wrathful. How would you respond?
8. How does Christ solve the riddle of the Old Testament? What do we mean when we refer to Christ as our “priest”?
9. What is the Christian gospel?



10. What do Christians have awaiting them at the consummation of all creation? What will Christians fully enjoy that was last enjoyed by Adam in the Garden and partially by the high priest in the Most Holy Place? What do you think that will be like? Do you think you will grow tired of it? Can you imagine anything so beautiful and wonderful and marvelous that you would never grow tired of it?

11. If you were sitting in an undergraduate philosophy class—or wherever you happen to sit among non-Christians these days—and someone asked what the point of life was, what would you say? Could you defend your answer?

12. William Wilberforce seemed to take seriously Paul's own dilemma: "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Phil. 1:23-24). Wilberforce knew his prize awaited him in heaven, and so he was free to spend himself entirely on earth for God's work. Where is your ultimate prize? You prize *something* the most. You can figure out what it is by asking what you spend all your physical, financial, social, and mental resources trying to build, protect, or accomplish. What is it? Is your life increasingly lining up with the great promise of the Scriptures—or with something else?