

The Unifying Message of the Bible

Is the Bible one book or many? There is much that makes the Bible diverse. But what ties it together? If it is really one book, we would expect a unifying story or message similar to a plot in a novel. Too often the Bible's stories are isolated from any overall message. If we know that main message, we will better understand the Bible in its parts.

The Bible's Diversity

There are 66 books in the Bible written over a period of 1600 years by over 40 different authors. These authors had diverse backgrounds (e.g., prophets, priests, kings, fishermen). They wrote different kinds of literature (e.g., law, narrative, prophecy, poetry, personal letters) from different places (e.g., Israel, Babylon, Persia) to diverse audiences (e.g., Ninevites, Palestinian Jews, scattered Jews, Roman Christians) with a variety of moods (e.g., sorrow, joy, worship, anger, love).

The Bible's Unity

Yet the 66 books of the Bible are placed under one cover that claims one Author, God. What is the common message they share as one book? Various suggestions have been posited for the Bible's main message, or "center." Some suggest it is God, or God's glory, or salvation. Others focus on its forward movement and suggest the covenants, or the promises, or the kingdom. Others simply assert that Jesus Christ is the unifying theme.

To be complete yet concise, as well as helpful, the main message of the Bible should be stated in a full sentence. It is not complete or helpful to say that the Bible is about God, or Jesus Christ, or salvation, anymore than it is to say that *Moby Dick* is about a whale, or the sea, or revenge.

The Bible's Unifying Message

Here is a suggested statement of the the Bible's message in one concise sentence:
God is working to re-establish His rule over creation through man in the coming King and His kingdom.

Note the careful choice of words. First, we recognize the Bible is about God. He is the main character behind its literature and movement. But God is actively working to do something. He is re-establishing His rule over creation. This rule was entrusted to mankind at creation. God said, "Let us make man in Our image" (Gen. 1:26). The original form of the Hebrew justifies the translation "Let us make man *as* Our image." In other words, man was to be God's representative over the kingdom of creation, or a co-ruler with God who would rule in His place.

Too much has been written about what it means to be made "in (as) God's image." When we let the context speak for itself, we find a common idea repeated constantly. Man is to rule or have dominion over creation (Gen.1:26-28). In ruling, man is as God.

But man lost his ability and moral authority when he sinned against God in the Garden of Eden. He lost the right to rule as God's representative on earth. Both God and man's rule was usurped by an enemy, the devil. Though God maintains sovereign control, Satan has power over this earth. He is called "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). First John 5:19 says, "the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one." As proof of his power and control, Satan offered all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus Christ if Jesus would only worship him (Matt. 4:8-9).



So God's purpose for man was thwarted by Satan. Addressing God, the psalmist wrote about man,
*You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.
You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet.* (Psalm 8:5-6)

To fulfill this purpose for man, God must work to re-establish His rule over the kingdom of earth, but it must be *through* man, not apart from him. To do what the first man, Adam, failed to do, God sent a second Adam, Jesus Christ. To show that He identified with mankind in His mission, Jesus preferred to call Himself "Son of Man".

As both God and man, Jesus conquered Satan. At His first coming, Jesus, through His own death, destroyed Satan's spiritual power over mankind (Heb. 2:14). At His second coming, Jesus will also destroy Satan's physical reign over the earth and re-establish His own Kingdom (Rev. 20:1-10). Mankind, through King Jesus, will once again rule creation as God intended.

The Bible's Story

The Bible's message is unveiled in a story, much like a novel's plot. The conflict introduced in Genesis is finally resolved in Revelation.

The plan to re-establish God's rule was unveiled as soon as that rule was lost. God told Satan that he would be destroyed by a descendant of the woman (Gen. 3:15). Genesis shows how God then selected a people (Abraham's descendants) which he narrowed to a nation (Israel) from which He chose one tribe (Judah) who would produce the King (Gen. 49:10). This plan He secured through a series of covenants with Abraham (to bring a blessing to the world), to David (to bring the King), and to Israel (to bring a New Covenant that includes forgiveness, a new heart, and the indwelling Holy Spirit). Meanwhile, God gave Israel the covenant of law through Moses to establish them as a nation, to help them enjoy life under the covenant with Abraham, and to lead them to faith in the coming King. Every book of the Old Testament contributes to this story of God re-establishing His rule through the coming King.

The New Testament presents Jesus as the King. Through His death and resurrection Jesus destroyed Satan's spiritual control over man. His miracles authenticated His authority and showed us kingdom conditions. But Jesus was rejected and crucified. Now we wait for Christ's return to finish Satan completely and set up His kingdom where we will rule once again through Him.

Conclusion

Though not always easy, the Bible student's task is to show how every part fits into the whole. Every book and story in the Bible contributes something to the unifying message. If we isolate the stories from this message, we teach out of context. To the extent that we do so, we rob people of the glorious hope of our destiny as God's people.

Finally, the message of the Bible is based on God's grace from beginning to end. God initiates His program of blessings for those who do not deserve it, who constantly disobeyed, who killed His only Son, and who constantly fall short of His standards. God's program and promises will not be fulfilled by our faithfulness, but only by *His* faithfulness. That is grace.