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## Chapter 1

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# THE THEME OF SCRIPTURE

**T**he Bible is the Word of God. It is not merely great literature or a collection of inspiring religious stories. Scripture is the breathed-out Word of God that reveals His character, work, and will, as well as our nature, corruption, and redemption (see 2 Tim. 3:16). The whole Bible, all sixty-six books and letters, written by over forty authors over a span of approximately 1,400 years, is a unified and inspired whole that declares who God is, who we are, and what the purpose of creation is. Scripture is a perfect revelation, meaning that what it reveals is absolutely true, though not exhaustive. We cannot know everything about God, who is infinite, but He has revealed what we need to know about Him.

Unfortunately, it is not just the world that often misunderstands what the Bible really is. Christians too often hold wrong ideas of the Bible's nature, purpose,

and usefulness. For instance, many believe the Bible is a kind of moral dictionary that answers every conceivable cultural question with perfect clarity. Others see the Bible as the roadmap to a fruitful spiritual life. Many churches today teach that the Bible is fundamentally about us and they promote the idea that in the sacred pages of Scripture are stories and truths designed to show us how we can be the heroes of our own lives. The Bible does reveal moral truth, spur spiritual growth, and includes us as participants in the story, but it is more than a moral dictionary. And it is not really about us.

The Bible, in all its parts, is one unified story of God's love for and salvation of sinners through His Son. From the opening pages of Genesis to the conclusion of Revelation, we discover the unfolding plan of God's work to redeem a people for His own possession through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the hero of Scripture, the full revelation of God, and the one to whom all Scripture points. Jesus is, as theologian Joel Beeke puts it, "the supreme focus, prism, and goal of God's revelation."<sup>1</sup>

## CREATION AND COVENANT

The Bible begins with the creation of humanity as people made in God's image and for fellowship with Him. Bearing the image of God means that, in some ways, we

look like God. Our innate sense of right and wrong, our capacity to rule well, to love, and to create—those are just a few of the ways we reflect God.

Not only that, we were made to live in communion with Him. We were created to love God and all His ways, to worship and obey Him. We were designed to have a relationship grounded in a covenant with God.

Covenants not only mark the movement of the history of redemption, but have always been the context for our relationship with God. What exactly is a covenant? In his book *The Covenant of Works: Its Confessional and Scriptural Basis*, pastor and author Richard Barcellos explains,

A divine covenant with man may be very briefly defined as a divinely sanctioned commitment or relationship. In this sense, covenants come from God to man. They are not contracts between equal business partners. They are not up for negotiation.<sup>2</sup>

In the first chapters of Genesis, we learn that God created man and immediately established a covenant between Himself and us. He placed Adam and Eve in the garden and called them to be fruitful and to multiply, to maintain the garden, and to rule righteously over the world they inhabited. The one explicit prohibition given to Adam and Eve was not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He gave them a warning, saying, “For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely

die” (Gen. 2:15–17). Obedience would yield blessing and life (Gen. 2:9; 3:22); disobedience would yield punishment and death.

This covenant God made with Adam applied not only to him, but also to all humanity, as he was our first parent and our representative. Adam represented all humanity and was responsible for all humanity (Rom. 5:12–14). This was the beginning. It was marked by innocence and righteousness. But things did not remain this way for long.

### THE SIN OF MAN

We do not know how long paradise lasted, but three chapters into the first book of the Bible, something catastrophic happens. Satan enters that perfect place and tempts Eve, the first woman, to disobey her God by eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Satan, masquerading as a serpent, assured Eve that not only would she live, but that in eating of that tree she would also become like God.

Eve caved and ate the forbidden fruit, and Adam quickly followed. In that first act of treason, the first humans did not simply break a rule; they rejected the will of God and His place of supremacy in their lives. The covenant was broken.

This first sin not only disrupted fellowship between

## THE THEME OF SCRIPTURE

God and our first parents. It opened a fissure between God and all of humanity, destroying our communion with Him. People originally created to be children of God became children of God's wrath (Eph. 2:1–3). Instead of resting in God's love, they fell into His judgment. In Adam, our representative, we all sinned and therefore became guilty of his transgression (Rom. 5:12).

From this point on in Scripture, the story is not only of man's sin, but of God's patience with and love for sinners. We broke our covenant with Him in the garden, but God held out another covenant through which sinners could be saved.

## THE PROMISE OF SALVATION

Sin and judgment came quickly into the world, but the promise of deliverance came even quicker. The first "good news" sinners ever heard was offered to Adam and Eve just after their rebellion. We find it in the middle of God's judgment on their actions.

God cursed Adam, telling him that as a result of his disobedience, work would be marked by pain and toil (Gen. 3:17–18). Not only that, he would return to the ground from where he was taken (Gen. 3:19). In short, the world would never be the same for Adam in his vocation, recreation, and relationships.

Then God cursed Eve, telling her that the pain of

childbearing would be multiplied and that her “desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). Eve, too, saw that not only was her relationship with God now broken, but so was her relationship with her husband and the rest of creation.

So far, the picture looks grim. But as God curses the Serpent, we find mercy and hope:

*Because you have done this,  
cursed are you above all livestock  
and above all beasts of the field;  
on your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.  
I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.*

(GEN. 3:14–15)

As result of God’s judgment on sin and evil, the anatomy of all serpents is changed. The devil, too, is cursed and is told that his destruction is coming. In that curse, God announces the remedy for our sinful condition: the offspring of the woman who will crush the serpent’s head. This promise is not about humans battling snakes. Rather, it is a foretelling that a descendent of Eve will

conquer the devil and put to end his work. This is the first preaching of the gospel, the good news that God will bring about salvation to the world through a Deliverer.

Despite God's promise of salvation, the world continued in sin and rebellion until Noah, who the Bible describes as a righteous man. After numerous generations continued to reject God, His patience finally came to an end. He told Noah that judgment would come upon the earth in the form of a flood. It would be catastrophic, and everyone would perish—except Noah and his family. God commanded Noah to build an ark, a large ship, so he and his family, along with a selection of the animals of the earth, would be saved.

The ark was built, the flood came, and the earth was covered in water. Noah and his family were spared, and after this divine act of justice, God established another covenant. He promised to never again destroy the earth with water, and He set the rainbow in the sky as a sign of His covenant to preserve creation (Gen. 9:9–17). This covenant would not save humans, but rather assured that God would preserve humanity and, in due time, save us through the offspring of Eve.

Centuries later, God established another covenant, this time with a man named Abram. God called Abram out of his homeland to make him a man of faith and the father of a great nation, one through whom the Savior



would come. He changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning "the father of many." God's promise guaranteed that Abraham and his wife, even in their old age, would conceive and bear a son, something they had been unable to do. This would be the beginning of the building of a nation. And through this nation, the whole world would be blessed (see Gen. 12; 15; 17).

Through Abraham and his descendants—Isaac, Jacob, and then Joseph—God created the nation of Israel. Israel was a people set apart by God to be His light in a dark world and through whom salvation would ultimately come, even to those outside of the nation. As the descendants of Abraham continued to increase, the Lord would formally establish the nation through a man named Moses. God used Moses to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. Once free from Egypt's tyranny, God established yet another covenant.

Whereas the previous covenants were made with all humanity, this covenant was made exclusively with the nation of Israel. Like the covenant in the garden at the beginning, it included a promise of blessing if they obeyed God, but curses if they rebelled. The difference was that in this covenant—which we now call the "old covenant" or the Mosaic covenant—grace was also promised.

God gave the nation laws to obey that governed their

religious, civil, and social life. Israel was given a means by which justice and mercy could thrive among the people as they lived according to God's laws. The laws regarding worship, including priests (leaders in worship who mediated between God and the nation), a tabernacle (the place of worship), and the sacrifices (the depiction of God's wrath against sin taken away from His people and poured out on a substitute) not only gave structure to Israel's life of faith, but also pointed to the coming Deliverer who would be the perfect Priest, the blameless Sacrifice, and the one in whom all God's people would be gathered together.

Yet, this covenant itself could not give life to the people. It only revealed how corrupt the human heart had become, and that if justice and mercy were to be experienced in this world, it could not come by obedience to the law. The old covenant reinforced the need for redemption and deliverance through sacrifice. Yet their sacrifices were not what would ultimately bring salvation.

Israel experienced many ups and downs while living under the old covenant. When the people obeyed the Lord, the nation was blessed and was at peace. But when they continued in sin and committed idolatry, they came under God's judgment. In the midst of this cycle, God established another covenant, this time with a king.

King David was the ruler of Israel. He was a righ-

teous king, a “man after God’s heart,” and God promised to bring a new and better King from David’s line, who would rule in perfect righteousness and whose kingdom would have no end. The reign of this coming King would be far different than what Israel had come to experience. The reign of a mortal king lasted only so long. Even good kings were marred by sin and often brought trouble upon the nation. God’s promise to David builds upon the promise that was made to Adam and Eve. One was coming who would reign in righteousness. God said to David,

*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*

(2 SAM. 7:12–13)

God’s original promise to Eve was repeated and clarified throughout the history of God’s people, repeating the same promise of deliverance through a special Deliverer. In the Davidic covenant we learn that the victorious offspring of Eve would be a king.

The Lord also raised up prophets to speak to His people. These were men who would speak on behalf of God, warning of coming judgment for sin, while encouraging

faith and repentance for the blessing of God. They often pointed to the future when the coming Savior would finally rescue and redeem the people from their enemies and their sin.

One of the most well-known prophecies concerning the coming Savior comes from the prophet Isaiah.

*Who has believed what he has heard from us?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been  
revealed?*

*For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look  
at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

*Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us  
peace,*

*and with his wounds we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

(ISA. 53:1–6)

The picture of the Savior becomes clearer with this prophecy. While He would be a King, He would be one of the people and appear to be no one special. He would be rejected by His own people and crushed for sins He did not commit. He would be the sacrifice that saves others, and He would make sinners righteous.

The whole of the Old Testament is leading us to see Jesus with increasing clarity until He stands before us in the pages of the New Testament.

### THE ARRIVAL OF SALVATION

The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus Christ, the one to whom all these other biblical stories point. Jesus Himself reinforced this: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). After reading from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue, He said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). And as He walked with

some of His disciples after His death and resurrection, He told them, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Jesus, the Son of God, came to take away sin, fulfill all righteousness, establish a kingdom, and conquer the devil. He did it all through His life, death, and resurrection, which became the basis for God’s final covenant—the new covenant.

In this covenant, perfect obedience was rendered to God not by sinners, but by Jesus’ righteous life. The penalty for sin was paid, not symbolically through animal sacrifice, but truly by the death of God’s Son. And life was brought back to the spiritually dead through the resurrection of Jesus. This was a covenant of grace where the only condition to enter into it is faith in Jesus, and there is no way to break the covenant once entered. In Jesus, salvation had arrived.