Unlocking the Message of the Bible

What Are You Missing?

By Brennan Wilson

No one understands the Bible! No book has been more mishandled than God’s Word, and it needs to stop.

Before I incite too much anger, please allow me to qualify my statements. I’m not questioning the sincerity of my brothers and sisters in Christ. I’m also not suggesting that I know more than the many faithful servants of Christ throughout the world, many of whom possess a vastly superior knowledge of the Bible. This isn’t an indictment. I’m speaking in hyperbole in the hope that I might jar our senses and force us to question our assumptions.

Wake up!

The reality is that most people have barely a grasp of the Bible’s *message*, even if they know much of its content. As a result, many regard the Bible myopically, only insofar as it serves their lives. This is tragic.

Far too often I’ve witnessed sentimental presentations declare the Bible a love letter from God to each of us. The fact is that unless we are more than two thousand years old, the Bible could not possibly be written to us, and given that much of it recounts historical events and prophetic judgments, there’s no possible way to confuse it with a love letter. This approach alienates much of the text from itself, leaving one either to ignore those sections or invent clever ways to “find” this theme. I know people typically use this cliché as a rhetorical device to provide listeners with a personal application that makes the Bible meaningful, but it needs to die. It’s not because this approach is void of truth altogether, but because it significantly obscures the Bible’s message.

Another popular presentation, generally delivered by the more theologically conscious, offers salvation as the sum of the Bible’s message. This approach seeks to unify the Bible’s variety of material by viewing it as an epic rescue mission in which God has systematically worked in Creation to save mankind from the consequences of their own choices. Again, such an approach is not without merit, but this contrives salvation as the controlling structure and is akin to smashing the square into the circle to make all passages fit. Salvation plays a massively important role in the Bible’s message, but it cannot account for all that God has done in history nor His prophetic plans.

A third approach has been trending in recent years that identifies the Bible’s theme as theocracy. In this approach, the Kingdom of God is said to give purpose to the Bible’s material and to extend from beginning to end. Yet, this approach has an Achilles heel, it doesn’t truly extend from cover to cover.[[1]](#endnote-1) True, the concept of general dominion goes back to Genesis 1:26 in which God commanded mankind to rule the earth, but to present this as the Kingdom of God says too much of the text.[[2]](#endnote-2) The Kingdom of God as a Biblical theme has its roots in Exodus 19:6 (“kingdom of priests”), at which time Israel gained a national identity as the subjects of God through a suzerain-vassal covenant. From there, the Kingdom concept was expanded through Israel’s judges who served as quasi-viceroys; then through Israel’s demand for a king in 1 Samuel 8 and Saul’s subsequent enthronement; and finally fixed as an eternal program through God’s covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, which promises a permanent mediatorial Kingdom. While the Kingdom of God is a massive theme, it is difficult to see how such a theme could account for the totality of Scripture after having only been first hinted at nearly seventy chapters into the Biblical text. As well, while many solid teachers have done great service to Bible teaching using this approach, there exists vast confusion on this topic throughout Christendom. Dr. Andy Woods highlights this confusion, writing,

The idea of the “kingdom” can be bewildering, especially considering how this term is loosely bandied about by today’s evangelicals. Many ministries convey the notion that the kingdom is strictly a spiritual and present reality by indicating that they are “expanding the kingdom” or “building the kingdom” through their evangelistic and missionary endeavors.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Later he continues, “This [kingdom now] theology not only radically alters God’s design for the church but is also the seedbed of many major false doctrines that have sadly entered Christ’s church.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Such spiritualization destroys the intention of the detailed prophecies of Scripture and undermines God’s authority over His Word. The fact that the Kingdom of God can be applied as the control (albeit falsely) of various interpretive schemes indicates that it is not the ultimate theme of the Bible. A unifying theme should work against spiritualized approaches. To be sure, the Kingdom of God is one of the most important and most expansive themes in Scripture, but to regard it as *the* unifying theme is too narrow. The message of the Bible is broader still.

Finally, a last approach deserves mention, which presents the Bible’s theme as doxological.[[5]](#endnote-5) In this approach, an attempt is made to broaden the Bible’s message so that it accounts for its variety of material. Much is to be commended since this approach adequately accounts for the breadth of material in the Bible and magnifies God as working in Creation toward His glory. Yet, even this approach presents some drawbacks. To start, while this approach is certainly not incorrect, it is vague. By presenting the Bible’s message as doxological, the Bible student is left without a concrete understanding of how this forms a theme. Doxology is undoubtedly the *result* of the Bible’s theme, and it does give a broad purpose to the Bible, but by itself, it fails to organize the Bible’s content in a way that gives sufficient purpose to the individual components. It’s not specific. As Rolland McCune notes, “The most primitive purpose of God is His activity to glorify Himself, but that purpose should be connected to some less remote, penultimate end on the historical level.”[[6]](#endnote-6) It’s clear that the Bible’s components work toward the goal of God’s glory, but why are the individual components necessary? Why are they there, and how do they fit together? The doxological approach lacks satisfactory cohesion. Still, I would encourage students of the Bible to begin with this approach, but what I believe we lose by summarily teaching the Bible this way is the tremendous necessity of the pieces fitted together. We do not want to be too narrow nor too broad. We want our explanation of the Bible to properly reflect its message.

So then, having made my critiques of the answers given by others, let me offer my approach. If you want to know what the Bible is about, here it is—the Bible is about God’s program for Creation!

Now, before you dismiss this as anticlimactic, please listen to what I’m saying. The Bible’s message is about Creation. It’s about God’s program for Creation—with primary attention given to earth—and how God is working in time to bring Creation toward a perfect end. All the material you find in the Bible will in some way serve this message. God’s program for Creation will ultimately bring God matchless glory, but identifying Creation as the Bible’s message instead of doxology more directly addresses the content the Bible contains. When we grasp that Creation is the focal point of all Scripture, something amazing happens: we begin to understand why the pieces are there. Why the individual books were written. Why God has designed things the way He has and used people in the ways He has. Rather than forcing the Bible to fit into an anthropocentric, soteriocentric, or theocratic model—among others—this approach focuses on the topic that permeates the Scriptures from the first sentence[[7]](#endnote-7) through Revelation (a book about God’s reclamation of His Creation). But lest you think I’m forcing a conclusion, let me demonstrate Scripturally that God’s program for Creation is indeed the message of the Bible.

As already noted, not only do the first words of Scripture speak of Creation, but Creation dominates the first three chapters. Sadly, for many these chapters serve as little more than storybook setting. To most, they bring the reader into the writer’s world, but then quickly fade into the background of the main plot. Yet, Creation should not be viewed this way. Not only are we dealing with factual history, but the plot itself is intimately tied to the Creation. The plot begins with God’s assigning His proxies to manipulate the Creation toward expansive productivity. Notice the mission God gave man: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Here, God specifically highlighted the Creation as the topic of concern. Next, after having placed Adam in the Garden to begin his assignment, God placed a single limitation on him: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16–17). If mankind followed these instructions by positively working toward increase and negatively abstaining from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would have appropriately managed God’s Creation. However, as with any plot, conflict necessarily arose. After receiving a wife to help with his task and listening to her misguided advice (dereliction of duty on his part), Adam mismanaged the Creation by participating in the one act God expressly forbade. God cited the offense: “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’” (Genesis 3:17). As a result, Adam and Eve’s ability to manage the Creation was hindered: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground” (Genesis 3:17–19).

As the Bible unfolds from this, the plot builds toward the restoration of both the nature of Creation and man’s ability to properly govern it. The book of Revelation completes the Creation plot by detailing its climax and resolution, which includes God’s violent overthrow of earth’s rebels, His reclamation of earth as His property, His restoration of mankind to their rightful place as His governors, and finally His recreation of earth to an Edenic-like state. The Bible’s plot is dominated by God’s concern for His Creation. God’s program for Creation is the message of the Bible.

With this understanding, we realize just how valuable the Creation is to God. Revelation 4:11 says, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.” That word *will* is θέλημα (*thelēma*) in the Greek text, and it carries the idea of a desired outcome.[[8]](#endnote-8) The King James brings this idea out well by translating it as *pleasure*. The Creation pleases God. This explains His appraisal of the Creation as “very good” in Genesis 1:31. The Hebrew word טוֹב (*tôv*) means “good” or “pleasing.”[[9]](#endnote-9) For additional force, God used the word מ‍ְאֹד (*me’ōd*) to describe the Creation as *exceedingly* pleasing.[[10]](#endnote-10) In our English translations of Genesis 1:31, the force of God’s statement is reduced to mere adequacy, yet the Hebrew expresses the Creation in absolute terms—perfectly pleasing in God’s sight.

The priority of Creation makes sense when compared to the works of human hands. Even the most phenomenally creative, intricate, profound, massive, and powerful inventions man has engineered pale in comparison to the seemingly limitless, highly organized, irreducibly complex, and symbiotically dependent Creation that is as massive as it is minute and as complex as it is organized. God has no equal, and the Creation is the demonstrable, tangible, and concrete proof that He is immensely powerful, knowledgeable, good, and caring. In other words, the Creation is the achievement above all achievements; the masterpiece of all masterpieces; and the wonder over all wonders. God created a self-maintaining, self-governing, and self-propagating masterpiece filled with living organisms, and as it increases in fruitfulness, it unlocks the boundless potential God has built into it. When we consider what the Creation is, it becomes obvious why God receives so much glory through it and why He will not release it to permanent corruption.

Psalm 8:1, 3–4, “O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens! . . . When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him?”

God created with tremendous intentionality. This gives logical impetus to the extensive plan He has undertaken to ensure that His Creation will not persist forever in a polluted state. Any theological approach that discounts the immeasurable value of God’s Creation and focuses only on spiritual salvation or self-help is an insult to the breathtaking purpose God has built into Creation. Only a robust eschatology completes this purpose in equal measure, and only a creatiocentric approach to the Bible’s message gives due honor to its place in God’s affections.

One might object that what I’m presenting sounds much like the creationist movement’s devotion to the Creation account. To that, I would point out that while the movement deserves a great deal of appreciation for bringing God’s Creation into the spotlight, they fail to connect it programmatically to the text of Scripture. Without following it through and finding its completion in eschatology, they use the Creation as merely an apologetic and miss out on the full weight of God’s purposes for it. Only when Creation connects to all parts of Scripture do we do it justice.

Now, having established the Creation as the proper theme of the Bible, one might wonder what the real-world effects are. First, as previously explained, this approach will increase our understanding of God’s Word and the logical necessity of all its parts. As well, we will begin to understand our place in God’s Creation as managers. If our goal is to bring productivity to the earth for God’s glory, purpose is given to our daily lives as we all engage in work, school, and other pursuits. In the other approaches, we may know that the Bible tells us “whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31), but we are left without a practical answer as to why. In contrast, with God’s Creation as the focus, we understand that when we are productive and we enjoy the Creation God has made, we bring Him glory. In a society ever-drifting away from theology in an attempt to make the Bible more practical, this approach accomplishes the practical side without having to contrive it or jettison truth. Practicality naturally flows from the Bible. This approach gives purpose to work and play, friends and family, time and energy—things that in a soteriocentric approach are at best peripheral.

Another thing this approach naturally offers is a meaningful view of eternity. I’m aware that many Christians struggle with an underwhelming view of the future. This is not often due to a spiritual failure on their part but to a misrepresentation of what the future holds. With a soteriocentric approach, all attention is placed on the intermediate state. Yet, that is not where our ultimate hope rests. Every Christian should be looking forward to a real world, just like the one we live in today, only one no longer suffering from the corruption of governments, financial and familial hardships, violence, disaster, pain, and death. We will live on God’s physical Creation, serving Him and governing Creation as He intended. Revelation 22:5 states, “There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in [the New Jerusalem], and His bond-servants will serve Him. . . and they will *reign* forever and ever” (Rev. 22:3, 5; emphasis added). We will not live in purposeless existence. We will be governing God’s Creation in perfect physical bodies, on a perfect physical earth, free from the hindrance of the curse.

What I’m proposing is not altogether new. This approach comes from a thoroughly dispensational understanding of the Bible, but I believe it tightens up the language we use and makes a significant improvement to the system. To those who might argue that what I’m proposing is semantics, I would agree. Words matter, and while basically everything I’ve said has been taught in some form by dispensationalists for years, I think the words we use can leave our system vague for the average church member. I also believe that one could word this approach differently and still preserve the point. Yet, however we word it, the point needs to account for everything—including the governance of man over Creation but even further to include the Creation itself—without being so broad that the Bible’s parts become incidental. There is nothing more important than understanding the Bible, for through it God has revealed Himself and what He plans to do with the Creation we’re a part of. If we offer approaches that do not satisfactorily reflect His Word, our churches and our family in Christ lose out on many of the overflowing truths God has revealed to us. We must be sure we know what the Bible is about.

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1. This is not to use the term *kingdom* narrowly. For example, the Bible uses it to refer to earthly kingdoms (e.g., Gen. 10:10) and God’s universal rule (e.g., Psalm 103:19–22), among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Many faithful teachers have taught this, such as Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, and this in no way is meant to diminish the great impact he has had. This is only an encouragement toward a more concrete use of the Kingdom concept. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Woods, Andrew M. *The Coming Kingdom: What Is the Kingdom and How Is Kingdom Now Theology Changing the Focus of the Church?* Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 341. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is not to suggest that these are the only approaches that exist, just that they are representative of the majority views. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. McCune, Rolland. *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels*. Vol. 1. Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009. 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Literally the second word—בָּרָא (*bara*) “to create.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Bianchi, Francesco. “Desire.” Edited by Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, and Rebekah Hurst. *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Lexham Bible Reference Series. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing Biblical Aramaic. Oxford: Clarendon, 1907. 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 547. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)