



# A Biblical Overview

## Themes of the Bible

### I. The Lordship of God in Creation and Redemption

The Almighty God is the Lord of heaven and earth. God's lordship is seen in his sovereign rule over all things. Adam and Eve were created to rule for God by establishing his kingdom on earth for God's glory and humanity's good. Where the first Adam disobeyed and failed (Gen 3) to establish God's kingdom, the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, succeeded.

### II. The Unfolding Drama of the Development of the Kingdom of God.

It is the story of how the sovereign Lord acted in human history to establish his kingdom to save man and glorify himself. Jesus Christ is the center of that activity. He is the Redeemer promised to Adam and Eve who will defeat Satan and save God's people (Gen 3:15). The Mosaic laws, the sacrificial system, the kingdom of Israel, and the OT prophecies all point forward to Christ, the messianic Redeemer.

Throughout this unfolding drama of redemption, the Bible addresses the important and practical issues of life: love, hate, fear, hope, need, desire, family, money, work, play, war, peace, and so on. The Bible consists of real history about real people who shared the same type of concerns that we face today, though of course there are differences between then and now.

## BIBLICAL OVERVIEW: WORSHIP AND RELATION WITH GOD

### I. THE OLD TESTAMENT--ISRAEL'S FAITH

#### A. The Covenant.

The covenant was the heart of God's love relationship with his people in the Old Testament. God always dictates the terms of his covenants, which assert his sovereignty and kingship and the people's obligation of faith and obedience. God's plan to redeem his people is progressively revealed through his covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David.

#### 1. Abrahamic Covenant - Gen 15:9-21;17

Under the terms of the Abrahamic covenant, God promised Abraham a land (Canaan), a nation (Israel), and that he would be a blessing to all people (Gen 15:9-21; 17). Abraham believed God's promises and faithfully obeyed God by submitting to the covenant sign of circumcision, an act that symbolized separation from sin and holiness toward God.

## 2. Mosaic Covenant - Exodus 19-24

Under the terms of the Mosaic covenant (Exod 19-24), God promised to be Israel's God--her protector and defender--and Israel swore to be God's faithful people. Obedience meant blessing and life (Deut 30:19-20); disobedience would result in curses and death.

## 3. Davidic Covenant - 2 Samuel 7:5-16

Under the terms of the Davidic covenant, God promised David's family an eternal throne and kingdom (2 Sam 7:5-16). This covenant pointed to the future Messiah, David's greater Son Jesus, who would finally fulfill all God's promises of redemption.

### **B. The Law**

The Law defined the substance of God's covenant with Moses and Israel. The Ten Commandments, which state one's basic duties to God and to one's neighbor, are the general principles of this covenant. After giving the Ten Commandments, God gave a number of specific regulations about worship and about his people's political and social lives. Circumcision was to remind the Israelites of their dedication to God. Although circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, it was mandatory under the Mosaic covenant as well (Exod 4:25-26; 12:44, 48), since in part it symbolized belonging to God. The specific sign of the Mosaic covenant was the Sabbath (31:12-17). The food laws stated what kind of animals, birds, and fish could be eaten and how these were to be killed and cooked.

### **C. Worship and Ritual.**

#### 1. Places of Worship

God gave specific instructions for building the tabernacle, the place where he dwelt among his people. This tent could be moved wherever the people went and was used for worship and sacrifice until the time of Solomon. It contained the ark of the covenant, in which Moses placed the two tablets of the Law. On top of the ark was a golden atonement cover known as the mercy seat, with a winged cherubim at either end. This symbolized the exact place where God was enthroned.

God's permanent residence was the temple in Jerusalem, which Solomon built in the tenth century B.C. (1 Kings 6-8). The temple was small and resembled the tabernacle. When Babylon conquered Judah, the temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. Zerubbabel and other returned exiles rebuilt a simple and less expensive version of Solomon's temple in 515 B.C. Continued invasions robbed the temple of its furnishings, and it fell into disrepair. Piece by piece, Herod the Great began rebuilding the temple in 20 B.C. This restoration was completed in A.D. 64, but the temple was completely destroyed in A.D. 70 by Roman armies.

During the Exile the Jews gathered in synagogues to pray and read the Scriptures. Synagogues served as centers of worship, education, and justice. Following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, synagogues became the focus of Jewish religious life.

#### 2. Ritual--Acts of Worship.

Although sacrifice is as old as Cain and Abel, it was not until the covenant at Sinai

that God defined the nature of sacrifice and the various kinds of sacrifices that he required. There are several kinds of sacrifices: sin, guilt, grain, fellowship, and burnt offerings.

In sin and guilt offerings, the sacrificial animal provided a way for God to forgive sin: the animal died in place of the sinner and as a substitute for his sin. The animal's shed blood (death) meant life for the offerer and pointed toward the final fulfillment in Christ, the once-for-all Sacrifice who brings forgiveness and salvation to all who trust in him.

Grain and fellowship offerings expressed gratitude and thankfulness to God for his provision. Burnt offerings expressed devotion and wholehearted dedication to God.

The feasts and festivals of the Hebrew calendar reminded Israel of God's past mercies and of her need for forgiveness. They also looked forward to Israel's future deliverance. God commanded these special times of joy and gladness to focus the nation's attention on him.

God gave the Jews the Sabbath, a weekly holy day set aside for rest and worship, as a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exod 31:12-17). The Sabbath was celebrated on the seventh day of the week by families and by small groups worshipping together. After the Exile, the Sabbath was celebrated in the synagogue.

Each year every male Jew was required to attend three pilgrim feasts in Jerusalem. These were the Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Passover, the most important feast, was to remind the Jews that God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and had formed them into his own nation. God "passed over" the houses of the Jews because their doorposts had been smeared with blood, but he brought judgment and death to the unprotected homes of the Egyptians. Passover was celebrated in mid-April, along with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which lasted seven days. Jesus' last supper with his disciples was a Passover meal. At that meal Jesus gave the Passover new meaning by identifying himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The Feast of Pentecost (also known as the Feast of Weeks or Harvest) was a one-day celebration at the end of the wheat harvest and was held fifty days after Passover. After the Exile, the Feast of Pentecost also celebrated the giving of the Law. Jesus' disciples received the promised Holy Spirit on this day (Acts 2).

The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) was an eight-day celebration that took place in the autumn at the final harvest of olives and fruits. It was similar to our Thanksgiving. During this feast, the people made shelters, or "booths," to remind them of Israel's time in the wilderness when the nation lived in tents.

The Day of Atonement was the most important and solemn day of the Jewish religious calendar. On this day the high priest sacrificed a goat for the sin of the nation, entered the Holy of Holies, and sprinkled the animal's blood on the mercy seat, thereby making atonement for Israel's sins. Atonement means to cover sin by paying for it with a sacrifice that represents and substitutes for the sinner. According to the Bible, an atoning sacrifice brings together and reconciles God and man, enemies who had been separated by sin. After making atonement, the high priest confessed the sins committed during the past year over the head of a second goat, thereby identifying the goat with the people's sins. This goat was then sent out into the wilderness to

symbolize the removal of Israel's sins. The Day of Atonement had to be repeated each year, and this showed that a better, permanent solution for sin was needed. Jesus' death on the cross was the final and complete atoning sacrifice for sins.

#### **D. Jewish Religious Leaders - Priests, Prophets, Scribes**

The priests in the Old Testament served as the links between a sinful people and a holy God. At Mt. Sinai, God appointed three groups within the tribe of Levi to serve in Israel's worship. Aaron was chosen to be the high priest. His most important role came on the Day of Atonement, when he offered the blood in the Holy of Holies. Eleazar, Aaron's son, became the next high priest. All future high priests were to be chosen from his family. In the NT Jesus is the great High Priest who offers himself for the sins of his people.

The remainder of Aaron's family also were from the tribe of Levi. They, too, were appointed as priests. They were divided into twenty-four groups, and they offered sacrifices and served in the tabernacle. The remainder of the Levites were chosen to help the priests care for the tabernacle and later for the temple. They were responsible for taking care of the furnishings of the tabernacle and for putting it up and taking it down. Later, when the temple was built, they served as singers, musicians, porters, gatekeepers, and assistants to the priests. The Levites received their support from the people who were to give them a tithe (one-tenth) of their income. The Levites in turn gave one-tenth of this tithe to the priests.

Prophets in the OT were God's spokesmen. They proclaimed God's words, predicted the future, promised future deliverance through the Messiah, and called the people to repentance and obedience to the law. Sometimes prophets received their message from God in dreams or visions. Sometimes God spoke to them directly. Prophets often were unpopular with the people because they exposed their sin and predicted judgment on both Israel and other nations. In Deuteronomy 18, God gives the test of a true prophet: his words will come true. Ultimately Jesus Christ fulfilled the message of the prophets.

## **II. THE NEW TESTAMENT--CHRISTIANITY**

The NT focuses on the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus Christ. His coming fulfilled the promises of the OT and ushered in the kingdom of God. God's promise to bless all nations through Israel was fulfilled in God's only Son Jesus, a Jew of David's line, who makes salvation available to every Jew and Gentile who puts his trust in him.

### **A. Jesus Christ.**

#### 1. The Covenant

Jeremiah prophesied of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) under which the Law would be written on people's hearts and God would forgive their sin on a permanent basis. This helped to revive Israel's interest in the idea of God's covenant.

At his last Passover meal, Jesus referred to his body as bread and to his blood as wine--he was the Passover Lamb who was symbolically eaten by his disciples as a covenant meal. His death on the cross the following day was the basis for the new covenant. The Mosaic, or old, covenant was established when the Israelites promised to obey its terms and Moses sprinkled animal blood on them--the blood of the covenant (Exod 24:5-8). The new covenant was established with Jesus' blood (Matt 26:28). He is a sacrifice that in every way is superior to animal sacrifices (Heb 9:12-14).

Israel was under God's curse because of her own sinfulness. She was never able to obey God's law perfectly. On the cross Jesus took the curses of the law on himself to redeem sinful humanity (Gal 3:13). By his once-for-all sacrifice, Jesus removed sin from his people and established a new covenant (Heb 9:15, 26). Because God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand (Eph 1:20-23), Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to David (2 Sam 7:11-16; Acts 2:22-36; 13:32-37).

## 2. The Messiah

In the OT, the Messiah is described as God's anointed King (Dan 9:25-26; Ps 2:2-9), who would accomplish God's redemptive work, judge Israel's enemies (Ps 110:1-7), and establish God's kingdom (Isa 9:2-7; 11:1-9; Mic 5:3-4).

By intertestamental times the Jews pictured the Messiah primarily as a political leader who would overthrow their enemies and establish a physical kingdom. Both Jews and Samaritans believed the Messiah also would be a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15-16; John 6:14; Matt 21:11; Luke 7:16) and would be the mediator of a new covenant. Because of these political expectations, Jesus did not openly refer to himself as the Messiah during his ministry, though he emphasized that he fulfilled OT promises. Instead, he taught his disciples that he would fulfill the OT predictions of a messianic, Davidic king (Ps 2:7) by obedience, suffering, death (the Servant of the Lord--Isa 41:1; 53), and resurrection.

His entry into Jerusalem (Zech 9:9-10) reminded the people that the Messiah was a humble king who came to bring peace, not war. Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man. Because this title was not used by the Jews to refer to the Messiah, Jesus could give it his own meaning.

Because Jesus was not the political deliverer the Jews expected, he was largely rejected by his own people. The Sadducees wanted to maintain their political power. The Pharisees resented Jesus' rejection of their traditions, especially his view of the Sabbath (Matt 12:2-14), and considered his claims to be God blasphemous (Luke 5:21). Both of these groups united to bring about his death (Mark 11:18).

Following his death and resurrection, when earthly political hopes for him had vanished, Jesus' identity as the Messiah became the focus of early Christian preaching. By raising Jesus from the dead, God proclaimed him to be the Messiah, the promised deliverer, and the Son of God (Acts 2:31, 36; 3:18). Jesus is now seated at God's right hand (Ps 110:1), the ruler of an eternal and heavenly kingdom that far surpasses the merely national kingdom for which the Jews hoped in Christ's day.

### **B. The Church.**

Following Jesus' ascension, his small band of disciples were gathered in Jerusalem. There, at the Feast of Pentecost, they received the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity (2 Thess 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2). In the NT God revealed that there are three persons in one Godhead: God the Father; Jesus, who is God the Son; and the Holy Spirit, who because of Christ's completed sacrifice for sin now indwells all believers, as Ezekiel and other OT prophets promised. The Holy Spirit provides the power to obey God's laws, produces fruits of righteousness in the lives of Christians (Gal 5:22-23), and gives gifts to the church (1 Cor 12; Rom 12:6-8).

The church was born on Pentecost, when many Jews responded to Peter's preaching by repenting and trusting in Christ as the Savior and Messiah (Acts 2:40-41). These Jewish Christians met together to sing, pray, listen to the teaching of the apostles, and encourage one another in the faith (vv. 42-47). But as the church continued to grow, mounting opposition from Jewish leaders forced the Jewish Christians to leave Jerusalem (8:1-4). Everywhere these Jewish Christians went, they preached the gospel. As a result, many Gentiles and Jews responded by trusting Christ. From Jerusalem, the church first expanded to Samaria (8:14-17). Then it spread outside of Palestine to Antioch (11:19-30), and then to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, in fulfillment of Christ's commission to tell other nations the Good News.

One of the fiercest opponents of the early church was Saul, a devout Jew. While Saul was traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians, Jesus appeared to him and called him for a special work. Saul became Paul, Jesus' special missionary to the Gentiles. As he traveled from town to town, Paul proclaimed the message of salvation not only to Jews in the synagogues but also to Gentiles (Acts 9:15-16). During Paul's three missionary journeys, he spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. The kingdom of God that began during the ministry of Christ spread throughout the world to all people, Jew and Gentile alike.

At first after their conversion, Jewish Christians continued to attend the temple services and to celebrate the Jewish festivals. Jewish and Gentile Christians met in homes for worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, since Jesus' resurrection occurred on that day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). With the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, Jewish Christians no longer celebrated the Sabbath--Sunday became the recognized day of worship. The worship service of these early Christians was very similar to the synagogue service.

Two sacraments were observed by the early church: the Lord's Supper and baptism. The Lord's Supper is a new covenant meal celebrated with bread (symbolizing Christ's body) and wine (symbolizing Christ's blood). The Lord's Supper points backward to Christ's final sacrifice for sin and forward to his return in glory. John the Baptist used baptism as a sign of repentance. After Pentecost, new Christians were baptized as a sign of their new life in Christ. Christians have died to sin and are alive in Christ (Rom 6:4).