

The Outline and Central Theme of the Bible

To understand any book, we must first grasp its overall outline and central theme. We also need to analyze its structure correctly and clearly recognize its main divisions. The Bible likewise has its own outline, central theme, and structural divisions. Though the Bible contains sixty-six books, it has one unified outline, one central theme, and a very clear structural arrangement. If we would know the Bible properly, we must first make these three matters clear.

The Overall Outline

The entire outline of the Bible can be summed up in four phrases:

God's plan and creation; Satan's rebellion and corruption; man's fall and loss; Christ's redemption and building.

Within this outline stand four key persons: first, God; second, Satan; third, man; fourth, Christ. The whole Bible revolves almost entirely around these four figures. We may describe each with two governing verbs:

God: planning and creating.

God planned in eternity and created in time.

Satan: rebelling and corrupting.

After God made His plan and created all things according to it, Satan rebelled against God and corrupted God's creation. These two verbs — rebellion and corruption—sum up everything Satan has done in the universe.

Man: falling and being lost.

Man fell, and as a result, became lost from God's hand and God's purpose. The

entire biblical record of mankind can be summed up in these two words: man fell, and man was lost.

Christ: redeeming and building.

Throughout church history, when believers speak of Christ, they often focus only on redemption, overlooking or failing to see clearly the matter of building. Yet we must not forget the Lord's own words. He said the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. He also declared: You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church.

In the Gospel of John, the Lord came that the sheep might have life, yet He also spoke of raising up the temple in three days after it was destroyed. Whether we view His accomplishment of redemption or His coming to impart life to men, the ultimate purpose is the building of the church. Therefore we cannot only see redemption; we must also see God's building.

At the very beginning of the Bible, we see gold, pearls, and precious stones—all materials for God's building. At the close of the Bible, we behold a completed building constructed of gold, pearls, and precious stones. This shows us that God's ultimate goal in the universe is to obtain a spiritual building, accomplished through Christ the Lamb in redemption and built up thereafter. Hence concerning Christ, we must see Him not only as the Redeemer but also as the Builder. He came to redeem, and He came to build. God created all things and mankind precisely to gain this corporate building in the universe.

If we firmly remember these four persons and the two verbs that define each one, we will thoroughly understand the Bible's overall outline. According to His eternal plan, God created all things and mankind. In pride, Satan rebelled against God and maliciously corrupted God's creation, bringing about man's fall and loss. Then Christ came to redeem fallen man and build them into His glorious church, His mystical Body, that God might gain a corporate vessel to express Himself in union with them. This is the complete outline of the entire Bible.

The Outline of the Old Testament

The outline of the Old Testament is:

God' s creation, Satan' s corruption, man' s fall, and God' s promise of Christ for redemption.

Though the Old Testament contains thirty-nine books, it reveals how God created all things, how Satan entered in to corrupt God' s creation, how man fell, and how God promised the coming of Christ to accomplish redemption. Thus in the Old Testament, Christ is the hope of fallen mankind—the Redeemer promised by God.

The Outline of the New Testament

The outline of the New Testament is:

Christ redeeming sinners according to God' s eternal plan and building the church.

The Old Testament shows God' s creation, Satan' s corruption, man' s fall, and God' s promise of a coming Redeemer. The New Testament reveals Christ fulfilling God' s plan and promise, redeeming lost sinners, and building them into His glorious church as His mystical Body. In this way God obtains a corporate vessel to express Himself. When we combine the outlines of the Old and New Testaments, we arrive at the full outline of the entire Bible as stated above.

The Central Theme

Many Christian books on Bible study claim simply that Christ is the central theme of the Bible. Yet by the spiritual light we have received, this statement alone is insufficient. We must remember the apostle Paul's word: This mystery is great; but I speak with regard to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5)

Therefore we declare that the central theme of the Bible is Christ and the church. The Bible reveals not only Christ Himself, but also Christ's counterpart, His Body—the church.

The whole Bible unfolds who Christ is, yet it also consistently shows that Christ needs a church, just as a man needs a wife. At the very beginning of Scripture we read: It is not good for the man to be alone. In the New Testament we understand this as a type foreshadowing Christ needing a counterpart. The Bible presents Adam, and then shows how Eve was taken out of Adam to become his wife, that the two might be one flesh.

Paul declares this profound mystery refers to Christ and the church. We cannot read the Bible and see only Christ without seeing the church. Many expound Isaac yet overlook Rebekah. Just as there is Isaac and Rebekah, so in Scripture there is God in Christ joining Himself to man, while man occupies an equally vital place. The central figures of the Bible are not only God in Christ, but also redeemed humanity becoming Christ's counterpart. The universal couple is God and man. In the universe God is the unique Husband, and redeemed man is His bride. Man without God is like a widow; God without man is like a solitary man. The universe finds its purpose only in the union between God and man.

Thus the first scene at the start of the Old Testament portrays a man needing a bride—the man typifies Christ, who is the embodiment of God; the bride typifies the church, redeemed out of fallen humanity to be built as God's corporate dwelling place.

Throughout the Old Testament, God continually stands in the position of a Husband toward His people, regarding Israel as His spouse. Then the Lord Jesus came.

John the Baptist, His forerunner, proclaimed Him not only as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but also testified: He who has the bride is the bridegroom. John presented Christ both as the redeeming Lamb and as the coming Bridegroom.

In the Epistles, Paul writes that he betroths believers to one Husband, presenting them as a pure virgin to Christ. He also compares Eve's relationship to Adam with the church's relationship to Christ. At the close of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, a proclamation goes forth: The marriage of the Lamb has come. The New Jerusalem appears as a bride adorned for her Husband. This is the mingling of God and man—all the redeemed becoming one with their Redeemer, forming the universal mystery of Christ and the church.

The central figure running through the entire Bible is therefore this mystical couple: God and man made one, typified by man and wife becoming one flesh. The union of man and woman symbolizes the union of God and man. God becoming one with man is Christ; man becoming one with God is the church. God in His Son became Christ to be united with man; redeemed man in the Son is built up to be the church to be united with Christ. This mystical union, this oneness of Christ and the church—the oneness of God and man—is the very center of the Bible.

We may express the Bible's central theme in another way

Christ is God's living Word; the Bible is God's written Word. Christ is the content of the Bible, and the Bible is the explanation of Christ. Remove Christ from the Bible, and it becomes an empty book, a vessel without content. Likewise, no one can truly know Christ apart from understanding the Bible, for Scripture is the explanation of Christ. Only by reading the Bible's explanation can we know who Christ is.

Moreover, all that Christ is and has accomplished is manifested within and through the church. Hence the unshakable central theme of the Bible is Christ and the church. To know only Christ is not enough; we must also see the church. The

universal central figure revealed in Scripture has both a Head and a Body—the Head is Christ, and the Body is the church. Christ and the church together are the central theme of the Bible.

1. The Central Theme of the Old Testament — Leading Men to Christ for Redemption

The Old Testament leads men to Christ that they may receive redemption from Him.

2. The Central Theme of the New Testament — The Church Redeemed and Built Up in Christ

The New Testament reveals how the church is redeemed in Christ and built up unto God's eternal purpose.