# Seeing the Big Picture in Scripture

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*The Bible is more a library than a book. It contains a diverse collection of writings that span a wide spectrum of time (more than 1,000 years), dozens of different authors, and several languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). The many books range in genre from historical to legal to cultic to poetic to prophetic to personal letters to apocalyptic. No other book contains so many different stories, characters, and genres. How, then, does one get a handle on such a complex and sophisticated library?*

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Is there any unity to the diversity contained in the Bible? The Catechism answers such questions when it observes, "Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover" (no. 112). Behind the host of people, places, things, and the tremendous span of time stands God's plan.

In other words, history viewed through Scripture is really God's story ("His story"). God is the ultimate author of creation and history, and He has so designed history that it is shaped by the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Just as a novelist has a plan for weaving together all the incidents and characters in a novel, so too does the divine Author have a plan for uniting all things in His providential plot, revealed in Jesus Christ. So the key to the many books is the one story. But what is this one story? What is the Father's plan for Scripture and history?

The one overarching story that the Bible reveals is the key to discerning the unity of Scripture. This story enables us to interpret Scripture in light of its whole content and unity. This is one of the Church's principles for interpreting Scripture, and it keeps us from losing the larger meaning of the various stories and details (cf. Catechism, no. 112).

By inviting us to read Scripture with its content and unity in mind, the Church is asking us to read Scripture as St. Paul and the apostles did. Once Paul became a Christian, he no longer could read the stories of the Old Testament apart from Jesus. Indeed, he believed that those who read the Old Testament without Jesus in mind had a veil cast over their eyes, "but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (2 Cor. 3:16). Thus Paul always read Scripture in light of its unifying principle, Jesus, which is exemplified in his seeing Jesus as the new Adam who overcomes the problem brought about by the first Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-19).

Now that we have simplified the library of Scripture to the unity of a single story, how do we understand the story? The key to a story is its plot. The ancient philosopher Aristotle once observed that "the most essential thing to a story, its life and soul, is the plot." We can further narrow our focus and say that the key to a plot is its problem. At the heart of a plot is a problem that is introduced very early in a story, with the rest of the story working toward its resolution. One doesn't have to read far into Scripture to find the problem. It appears in the third chapter of Genesis: the Fall. **The problem created by the Fall and God's plan to resolve it is what the plot of Scripture is all about.** Let's examine the Fall and see how it sheds light on the rest of the story.

As everyone knows, the story of Scripture and the world began with a happy bride and groom on a honeymoon in the Garden of Eden. But paradise is quickly lost. The subtle serpent sows doubt about God in the heart of the woman through a series of carefully crafted questions. "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1). The subtle suggestion here is that God is a capricious tyrant who would keep back all the good trees of the garden from the young couple. Eve responds that they are free to eat of all of the trees but one, which they are not to eat or touch lest they die (cf. Gen. 3:3). The serpent then questions the purpose behind the prohibition: "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The serpent has sown doubt about the purpose of God's law is it for our good or is it a limitation set up by a God jealous of His prerogatives? Is the law concerning the forbidden fruit designed to keep the man and woman under God's thumb? These questions spark doubt about God and His law that is fanned into flame when Eve observes just how good the fruit looks. Why does God keep such a good thing from us unless . . .

Adam and Eve's fall from grace is caused by a failure to trust God. As the Catechism succinctly states, "Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness" (Catechism, no. 397). This failure of trust is a failure to perceive God's fatherly goodness, and instead mistake God for a tyrant who wants to subjugate them. Original sin is the mistaken conviction that God's authority is tyrannical, not fatherly.

Pope John Paul II believes that understanding how original sin is the failure to trust God as Father is the "key for interpreting reality." He says, "Original sin attempts, then, to abolish fatherhood, destroying its rays which permeate the created world, placing in doubt the truth about God who is love and leaving man only with a sense of the master-slave relationship. As a result, the Lord appears jealous of His power over the world and over man; and consequently, man feels goaded to do battle against God." Created in perfection, Adam and Eve were still created and under God, and by rebelling against Him they "grasped at equality with God." Humanity ever since then has wrestled with the question of whether God is a trustworthy Father, or a tyrant to be appeased and liberated from. Is God Abba or Allah? Father or master?

Trust in God's goodness is what faith is all about. Indeed, the Hebrew word for faith, amin, literally means trust. The ultimate question is not whether God exists, but rather, can He be trusted? More pointedly, can I trust that He seeks my good, with fatherly love and care? This latter question is the one both Adam and Eve and all of us must confront. This struggle for faith sets the stage for the covenant drama of God and His people throughout Scripture. From Abraham to Mary, the drama played out is the drama of faith.

The story of Adam and his exile from Eden soon becomes the story of Israel as well. Israel followed in the footsteps of Adam, and after rebelling against God also ended up in exile. Both Adam and Israel stood in need of salvation, and the darkness that reigned from Adam on is overcome only by the coming of the true light into the world, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn. 1:9-10).

The principle of *content and unity* calls us to read Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ. We have already observed how Paul is a model for such a unified reading of Scripture in Christ. In one of the most profound and succinct summaries of Jesus' life and mission, Paul contrasts Jesus' obedience to the Father with Adam's disobedience, and exhorts Christians to have the mind of Christ

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

Adam and Eve sought equality with God by rebelliously seizing the forbidden fruit, whereas Jesus, trusting in the Father, was obedient even unto death.

The story of disobedience and sin is resolved in Jesus' story of obedience and grace. In sharp contrast to Adam and Eve, who doubted God's fatherly goodness in the Garden of Eden, Jesus, in the midst of His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, calls out in trust to God as "Abba, Father" (cf. Lk. 22:42). In His last words from the Cross He gives himself completely to the Father, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:46). The problem of sin and death, the problem of Adam, Israel, and all humanity is solved by the death and Resurrection of the faithful Son of God, Jesus Christ (cf. Catechism, no. 2606). Here the story of Scripture reaches its climax and resolution.

Although we have only painted with some broad strokes the outline to this picture, the point is that when reading Scripture with the mind of the Church, our minds must grasp this larger picture. The principle of *content and unity* helps us to read the Scriptures with the unveiled eyes of faith. Reading with this principle in mind will open the Scriptures and make our reading deeply spiritual.

St. Paul knew the power of such a reading of Scripture when he wrote his Second Letter to the Corinthians. Such a reading will transform us as we dwell upon the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout Scripture. This is a bold promise indeed, but one borne over the centuries in the lives of the saints.

Review Questions…

1. Who is at the center of God’s Plan?
2. In what way is God like the Author of a novel?
3. Why is it important to interpret Scripture in light of the whole Bible and the unity of God’s plan?
4. How did St. Paul view the Old Testament?
5. What is the Veil that St. Paul spoke of?
6. What is the most essential thing to any good story?
7. In the story of the Bible what is the turning point or pivotal moment when catastrophe occurs?
8. What ‘failure’ ultimately causes Adam and Eve’s Fall from grace?
9. According to Pope John Paul II, why is it so important to understand that we are living in a fallen world?
10. What is the true meaning of Faith?
11. How is the problem of sin and death ultimately resolved?
12. Why does knowing the story of the Bible, The Big Picture, help us to know who we are, why we fail, why we are here, and where we are called to go?