

# Gospel Pictures: Getting the Big Picture

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One of the most helpful things for me in my understanding of the Bible was being able to finally wrap my brain around its big picture. Understanding the big picture of Scripture enables us to start putting together its individual pieces. There are a lot of ways to understand the big picture of the Bible. There are a lot of good books and tools available to help us grasp how Scripture fits together and to understand the storyline of the Bible. The list of good tools and books available on the subject is a long one. My intention in writing this isn't to discount or discredit any of the good resources already available, but to just mention some things that I've found helpful in my own study of God's word as the big picture of Scripture has opened up for me over the years.

Most of us come to Scripture with a set of preconceived ideas about how it should be interpreted. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Whether it's good or bad depends on the ideas. The interpretive presuppositions that we sometimes bring to Scripture can be helpful or harmful. For example, if I come to Scripture convinced that the homespun saying, “God helps those who help themselves” is a Biblical truth, I am most likely going to interpret Scripture through that grid or lens. As I read the Bible, I am going to read it sensitized to what I bring to it and to what I presume to be true about it. In this case, I am going to have my hermeneutical radar tuned to watch for implications that support my preconceived idea that God helps those who help themselves. But this piece of interpretive baggage is harmful and is going to cause major problems in how I interpret the Bible, particularly when it comes to interpreting sections like the book of James. I'm most likely going to walk away from the passage feeling as though I understand it correctly because I've interpreted its meaning through my particular lens and to my own satisfaction. But in reality my interpretation, and ultimately my application, is going to be handicapped because I've interpreted it through the wrong grid.

## **Interpreting the Old Testament through the Lens of the New**

Interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament lies at the heart of understanding the Bible's big picture. The reason for this is because the New Testament gives us new and clearer information about the Old Testament that the Old Testament itself sometimes doesn't supply. Interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New elevates the Old Testament to its proper place in redemptive history by placing it in its full and final context. If we neglect what the New Testament says about the Old, our interpretation and application of Old Testament passages runs the risk of being incomplete and inaccurate. Not only that, but if we don't consult the New Testament for any additional information it gives us in our interpretation of the Old, there may be sections of the Old Testament that we just don't know what to do with because they don't seem to fit anywhere. Additionally, if the theological system that have pledged our allegiance to doesn't recognize this interpretive principle and practice it unencumbered, our theological conclusions about how Scripture fits together may be at a disadvantage. The Old Testament is incomplete apart from the New. The New Testament gives us new information about the Old that the Old itself may have never been intended to convey. The Old Testament is a veiled mystery apart from the New. Let's look at this in Scripture.

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Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, *according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed* and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, emphasis mine)

By design, the Old Testament kept certain things veiled and hidden. Paul calls these hidden things “mysteries.” One of the functions of the New Testament is to reveal those mysteries that the Old Testament kept hidden for long ages, disclosing them and making them clear. Apart from God’s complete and final revelation in the New Testament, his plan for redemptive history remains a mystery. We cannot completely understand it without the New Testament. Interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New is paramount to understanding how Scripture fits together and should be non-negotiable in our interpretive arsenal. Paul also reminded the Colossians,

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints*. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:24-27, emphasis mine)

The full and complete revelation of God is incomplete without the New Testament. The Old Testament is, by divine design, is utterly dependent upon the New Testament to complete it. The great truth that Gentiles would be included in the people of God and that the church, not Israel, is the true holy nation of Scripture is truth that can only be extracted by interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New. The New Testament de-mystifies the Old. Interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New and allowing the New to interpret the Old for us should be standard interpretive procedure.

## **The Big Picture: How Scripture Fits Together**

Simply stated, the purpose of the Old Testament was to prepare for the New. If we read it without keeping that in mind, we can get into trouble with our interpretation and begin to think that the Old can be an end in and of itself. Of course that doesn’t mean that everything in the Old Testament has direct dependence on the New, but when it comes to understanding the big picture of how Scripture fits together, we must understand that the New Testament completes the Old and when the New speaks to something introduced in the Old, we must pay attention and if what we read conflicts with what our preconceived system of theology has taught us, it is our system of theology that must bow the knee to Scripture in context. We must submit our ideas to the authority of Scripture.

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The New Covenant Scriptures complete the story that was only begun in the Old Testament and they give us more information about the Old. Whenever necessary, the New Covenant Scriptures need to be consulted in drawing our conclusions about the Old Testament. Failure to do so could cause us to miss important information that might be vital in our understanding of how Scripture fits together. In short, the Old Testament should always be interpreted through the lens of the New. With that in mind, we can now take a closer look at how Scripture fits together. We will do that by looking first at a brief description of the major covenants in Scripture, followed by a more definitive discussion of the three major covenants, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant.

## **A Brief Summary of the Covenants in Scripture:**

The first covenant recorded in Scripture was the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9:1-17). We are still under the Noahic covenant and will be until the second coming. The Noahic covenant is God’s promise that the earth will be here until the second coming and the end of redemptive history. The earth is the stage on which redemptive history is being played out and until redemptive history draws to a close, the stage will always be there. God’s covenant with Noah promises us that.

The second covenant recorded in Scripture is the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3, *et al*). The Abrahamic Covenant is God’s promise to create a people, save them from slavery, and bring them into a land. We will come back to the Abrahamic covenant in just a minute.

The next covenant given in Scripture is the covenant made with the ancient nation of Israel on Mount Sinai near the beginning of the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 19). This covenant was made only with the nation of Israel, Abraham’s physical descendants through his promised son, Isaac (Exodus 19:5). In the New Testament, this covenant with Israel is called “Moses”, the “First Covenant”, and the “Old Covenant.” In addition to its historical beginning in Exodus 19, this covenant had an historical end with the beginning of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:13).

The next covenant mentioned in Scripture is the Davidic covenant – the covenant made with King David during the period of the kings in ancient Israel’s history. This covenant was God’s promise to David that he would have a son on the throne after him and that son would reign perpetually in an everlasting kingdom. This covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ to his heavenly throne at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:22-36).

The New Covenant is the last covenant mentioned in Scripture and it is the covenant that we are currently under. The New Covenant is the cross work of Christ, securing the perfect payment for sin for all of God’s elect, the church (1 Corinthians 11:25-26). The historical beginning of the New Covenant corresponded with the outpouring of the Spirit and the beginning of the church in Acts chapter two.



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The next covenant that we want to talk about is the covenant made with Israel on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. As I said above, the New Testament calls this covenant the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:14), Moses (2 Corinthians 3:15), or the First Covenant (Hebrews 8:7). All three of these names refer to the same covenant made with Israel at Sinai. This is worth talking about, so let's take a moment to do so. First, why would the New Testament call this covenant the First Covenant if it wasn't the first one in historical succession? It does so because Scripture is speaking in terms of the Abrahamic Covenant and God's promise to save a people. Its emphasis isn't on chronological succession, but on how God has revealed his plan to save a people and bring them safely into a land. It is called "first" simply because God first illustrated or pictured the promise to Abraham in the physical nation of Israel. The Abrahamic Covenant was "first" pictured in the Old Covenant era, and then fulfilled in the New Covenant era. This relates to our first bulleted item above. It is called the Old Covenant because of our second bulleted item above. It is not "old" until the covenant that fulfills it begins – the New Covenant. Once the New Covenant is instituted, the time of the picture gives way to the time of fulfillment and the covenant with Israel on Sinai becomes "old" because its purpose in redemptive history is finished. Scripture is speaking in terms of the promise made to Abraham when it calls the covenant with Israel, the Old Covenant or the First Covenant. This covenant was a temporary physical picture that gave way to the New Covenant, the true fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham to save a true people, the church, and bring them into true rest, salvation and heaven (Hebrews 4:1-11).

## Game Day! A Home Spun Illustration

I'm going to place an illustration here from a few years ago that I think is effective in communicating the big picture of how Scripture fits together. This illustration uses the analogy of an American football game to show God's unfolding plan of redemption and the big picture purpose of both the Old and New Testaments. It's far from perfect, but I've used it successfully over the years to help illustrate how Scripture hangs together and to explain the big picture. Here's goes:

It's game day! As you approach the crowded stadium you are handed a program that explains the overall plan for the big game. The program is not exhaustive and it doesn't provide every detail of the game, but it gives you enough information to understand that there will be a game. In our allegory, the program represents the Abrahamic Covenant and it tells you in very simple terms what God is going to do in the game. He is going to save a people and bring them into a land. In our allegory, the game is redemptive history.

After you have entered the stadium and made your way to your seat, the first thing you notice is the field where the game will be played. In our analogy the field represents the earth. You were guaranteed that the field would be there because of the Noachic Covenant, which was God's guarantee that there would be a place to play the game. The field is intact because God made a covenant with Noah in which He stated that He would never again destroy the earth as long as the game is being played. As you sit in your seat pondering these things, the pre-game

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preparation begins. The game has not yet begun as outlined in the program, the Abrahamic covenant, but the pregame preparation is important and vital to the success of the game. In our analogy, the pregame is the book of Genesis. The pregame is important. In the pregame, God is preparing both the field and the players for the game. He is sovereignly moving the players where they need to be in order to fulfill the promise made to Abraham to create a people, save them from slavery, and bring them into a land. Again, the game is redemptive history as revealed in the program, the Abrahamic covenant.

The game finally begins in earnest and your anticipation soars. As the game progresses, someone comes to your seat from time to time and gives you additions to the program. These additions do not replace your program, but they provide more detailed information as the game progresses and are useful in understanding why things occur in the game the way they do. They help you to see more clearly what is happening at every point of the game; God has made for Himself a physical people, Israel, and is settling them in a physical land, Palestine. These additions to the original program are not provided all at once, but are given to you little by little as the game progresses. In our allegory, the additions to the program at this point in the game are the Old Testament scriptures, which are not given to you all at once, but are provided in small portions over time as the game progresses (Hebrews 1:1).

As you watch the game being played on the field, you notice that the promises made to Abraham are very literally fulfilled in the Nation of Israel as God creates a people through Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, rescues them from slavery in Egypt, and brings them into a land, just like the program, the Abrahamic covenant, said he would (Joshua 21:43-45). As you continue to watch the game, you witness Israel settling into the land that was promised to them in the program. Soon, you have in your possession a large number of additions to the original program and as you sort through them, you realize that there has been no activity on the field for quite some time. Likewise, no one has come to your seat with more additions to the program in quite some time. Following a lengthy delay, you begin to wonder if the game is over because it looks like everything’s finished due to the fact that the program you hold has been literally and physically fulfilled with Israel’s occupation of the Promised Land. While musing over whether or not the game is finished, an announcer comes over the PA system proclaiming the start of the second half of the game. At such an announcement, your interest is peaked because until this point, you had no idea that the game was going to be played in two halves. The additions to the program you’ve received so far haven’t been clear enough to lead you to that conclusion.

A short time after the start of the second half, someone comes to your seat and gives you one final addition to the program. It is only after you receive this final addition that you fully understand how the game is being played. Without this final addition, your knowledge of the game was incomplete and you understood it in a limited way. What you understood in a limited way prior to receiving the final addition, you now understand fully and are able to make sense of both how the game is played and its intent. Now as you read the program in its fullness, you realize that the game is being played in two halves. The first half is finished and the second half is now underway. Now you understand that the first half only begins the game; it’s not the entire

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game as you initially assumed. In fact, the first half is incomplete without the second half. Now it is clear to you that the first half cannot be understood correctly without the final addition to the program provided during the second half. It is the second half that brings the game (redemptive history) to its conclusion.

Looking back, you remember that as the first half drew to a close, you began to wonder if the game was over because God was already faithful in making a physical people and bringing them into a physical land. Then, as the second half of the game started and you received more information, it became clear to you that the first half was only a physical picture of what God was going to do in the second half. Prior to the commencement of the second half and its subsequent addition to the program, you were unable to clearly understand the meaning of the game. Now that you have all of the additions to the program that are to be given, you understand that the first half was an illustration of the second half. What was written in the program initially (God’s intention to create a people, rescue them from slavery, and bring them into a land) ultimately applies to a spiritual people – the church – in a spiritual land – heaven (Hebrews 4:1-11; 11:40), as He rescues them from spiritual slavery to sin (Romans 6:14). This wasn’t fully revealed until the second half began and you were given additional information. It’s only after the second half began that you understood the true spiritual fulfillment of what was only pictured in a physical way during the first half. In our analogy, the additions to the program given in the second half of the game represent the scriptures of the New Covenant era, the majority of the New Testament. Without them, the game cannot be correctly understood (Romans 16:25-27; Ephesians 3:2-6; Hebrews 1:1-2; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Only after receiving them, do you realize that God’s plan to save a people and bring them into a land (the Abrahamic covenant) contains both the Old and New Covenants. The promise to Abraham is pictured in the Old Covenant and fulfilled in the New Covenant.

In our analogy the first half of the game is the Old Covenant; the second half is the New Covenant. The first half of the game is what God did in the Old Covenant era. The second half is what God is doing now in the New Covenant era. The Old Covenant is not the New and the New is not the Old, but understanding how they fit together is crucial to understanding the game. The Old isn’t called “Old” until after halftime and the New begins. While reviewing your completed program (Scripture) a second time, you realize that the promise of a field to play on (the Noachic Covenant) came long before the first half of the game started. Historically, it is the “first” covenant given to man, and yet the Old Covenant is referred to in the New Testament as the “first” covenant. Then it dawns on you that the first half of the game is “first” only in relation to the second half. In the unveiling of God’s plan to save a people and bring them into a land (the game in our analogy), the Old Covenant comes “first.” It is not the first covenant ever given, but as far as the game is concerned, it is “first.”

As with any analogy, this one is imperfect and can only be taken so far. Its point is to illustrate how Scripture fits together. God revealed His plan to save a people and bring them into a land in the Abrahamic Covenant. He then gave us a physical illustration of his plan in the Old Testament by redeeming the nation of Israel out of Egypt and bringing them into the Promised Land. This

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illustration lasted the entire first half of the game, the Old Covenant era. In the second half of the game, the New Covenant era, the physical illustration gives way to the real thing. In the New Covenant era, God is saving a true people of God (the Church, made up of Jew and Gentile) and bringing them into the true Promised Land, heaven. The Old Covenant people of God (the Old Covenant nation of Israel) served as a temporary, unbelieving physical picture of the New Covenant, true people of God, the Church.