

# SELF-FEEDER

*“The Storyline of Scripture”*

*Acts 17:11*

*October 1, 2023*

The book of Acts contains a lovely commendation of a first-century group of believers. It tells of the way Paul, upon visiting the city of Berea, encountered Christians who were well-versed in the Scriptures. In Acts 17:11, we read “...they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” The word rendered “examined” is one that meant “to examine accurately or carefully.” It carried ideas of wise discernment.<sup>1</sup>

If we want to be strong spiritually, we must strive to be like the Bereans. It should be our aim to regularly examine God’s Word. It should also be our desire to have discernment concerning the story of Scripture. Such things are necessary for spiritual health and vibrancy. One has said, “If the word of God is to shed light on our lives, to give guidance, direction, comfort, and understanding, we must learn to read it properly, and to let its truth, understood in its biblical context, engage and direct our thinking and our feelings.”<sup>2</sup>

## **The Plot of the Bible**

A part of gaining discernment in Scripture is developing an understanding of the storyline of Scripture. We have previously talked about the story of Scripture — Jesus Christ. However, to become even stronger in our grasp of God’s Word we must understand that there is an underlying flow to the Bible’s story about Jesus. There is a storyline.

When I was in elementary school, our school had an annual creative writing contest. I was never really good at sports, nor did I excel in any other school activity. However, I did win an award for our annual writing contest. I can remember our teacher preparing us for our entries. She told us about the concept of a story plot. She coached us to outline the key characters and events related to our story. She told of how there needed to be a problem to be solved, a climax to the story, and a resolution. Her advice helped me craft my ribbon-winning entry. I still remember the title — “Hudson Lowenthal’s Adventure!”

## **The Three C’s of Scripture**

When we come to the Bible, we find one big story — a story about Jesus Christ. However, there are characters, events, and themes that contribute to that big story. It is our desire to examine such things by focusing on the storyline of Scripture. To do so,

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<sup>1</sup> Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary, New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, B. Sinclair. *Maturity: Growing Up and Going On in The Christian Life*. (Edinburgh, U.K: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), 52.

we will follow an outline that contains three “C’s.” The well-known creationist author Ken Hamm has popularized an outline of human history that he calls “The Seven C’s of History” — Creation, Corruption, Catastrophe, Confusion, Christ, Cross, and Consummation.”<sup>3</sup> We will follow a similar, yet different, outline to discuss the storyline of Scripture. Our three C’s include Creation, Covenants, and Consummation.

## **1. CREATION**

The story of Scripture begins with creation. We read of this event in Genesis 1:1-2:25. The Bible is careful to give a high-level explanation of humanity’s beginnings. Man and woman are depicted as coming from God. In five days, the Lord made the Earth, the Earth’s atmosphere, dry land, the plant kingdom, creatures belonging to the water, and creatures belonging to the air. On the sixth day he created all animals, but he also created the crown of his creation — humankind.

Humanity was made to be special. The Bible describes humanity as being made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). Such is important to the storyline of Scripture. Whereas mankind was made to know God and to enjoy God, sin marred God’s original intent. The first man and woman were separated from God (spiritual death) because of their transgression (Genesis 3:8-24). Such things set the stage for the story and storyline of Scripture.

Jesus was introduced as the remedy to humanity’s downfall. It was promised that he would come from a woman to crush the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15). Humanity was created to be a people for God, but sin thwarted that purpose. The story of Scripture is all about God securing a people for himself through the work of Jesus Christ. The storyline of Scripture tells of how God performed this work through different covenants.

Before we move on to talk about those covenants, it is important that we note the place of creation in the storyline of Scripture. The Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly notes that man’s purpose is “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”<sup>4</sup> The creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 reveals this to be true. However, sin marred God’s original intent. We must not overlook these things as we seek to understand the Bible. To be healthy self-feeders, we must always keep the realities of creation in our minds. One has noted, “It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the doctrine of creation. Many Christians are naturally interested in the doctrine of salvation, but without creation there is no understanding of the Christian faith as the Bible describes it.”<sup>5</sup>

## **2. COVENANTS**

After he created all things, the Lord enacted different covenants with humanity in order to accomplish his purpose of redeeming a people for himself. In both the Old and New Testaments, Hebrew and Greek words for “covenant” are used to speak of God’s dealings with humanity (Genesis 6:18;15:18; Exodus 19:5; Matthew 26:28). In defining a covenant, one has said, “As its most basic level, a covenant is an oath-bound

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<sup>3</sup> Ham, Ken and Stacia McKeever. *The 7 C’s of History*. (Petersburg, KY: Answers in Genesis, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism with Scripture Proofs*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Wellum, J. Stephen. *God The Son Incarnate*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016), 113.

relationship between two or more parties.”<sup>6</sup> In regard to the storyline of Scripture, a covenant is an agreement between God and man which is initiated by God, and which contains obligations for both God and man.

One theologian has defined a Biblical covenant as, “A formal agreement or treaty between two parties that establishes a relationship and in which obligations and mutual responsibilities may be enacted.”<sup>7</sup> When we study Scripture, we find there are several features involved with most covenants — covenant laws and obligations, covenant promises of blessing, threat of consequences for breaking a covenant, blood, sacrifices, and more. We will examine some of these features as we briefly examine each of the biblical covenants. For now, it is important to note that God’s covenants provide the framework for understanding the storyline of Scripture.

One Puritan once prayed, “My God, I bless thee that thou hast given me the eye of faith, to see thee as Father, to know thee as a covenant God, to experience thee as a covenant God.”<sup>8</sup> He understood that God’s covenants play a major role in the redemption of God’s people. In what follows, we will consider this subject briefly and at a high level. Our purpose is to provide a barebones framework for understanding the storyline of Scripture. There are many different ways of labeling and classifying the covenants. We will approach the subject by identifying seven of them from Scripture.

### **A. The Covenant of Redemption**

The first covenant is one we could call “the Covenant of Redemption.” There is no explicit mention of this covenant in Scripture; however, theologians often speak in covenantal terms to describe the Trinity’s pre-Earth plan of salvation. In our study, we’ve already seen from Revelation 13:8 and Exodus 32:32 that God had a plan for salvation before time began. This is what is meant by the covenant of redemption — the eternal counsel of God whereby he planned to enact covenants in order to send his Son to secure a people for himself.

Theologians and Bible teachers refer to this covenant with a host of different names. Arthur Pink called it “the everlasting covenant.” He described it as the “provision of grace which God made for his people before the foundation of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Louis Berkhof defined the covenant of redemption as “...the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those home the Father had given him.”<sup>10</sup> This covenant has famously been referred to by a Latin title — *Pactum Salutis*, meaning “Covenant of Redemption.”<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that this pre-Earth covenant is an umbrella under which all other covenants reside. You can think of it like a container that hosts all other covenants. Maybe you could think of it like a Russian nesting doll (matryoshka doll). The *Pactum Salutis* is the largest doll (covenant) on the outside. Each subsequent doll

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, Mark. *Knowing Christ*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 18

<sup>7</sup> McKim, Donald. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 64.

<sup>8</sup> Bennet, Arthur. Ed. *The Valley of Vision*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 288.

<sup>9</sup> Pink, A.W. *The Divine Covenants*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2021), 271.

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, 265.

(covenant) is nested inside it. One has said, “There is one Testament of salvation from the beginning of the world, although there seems a difference in the mode of bestowing it.”<sup>12</sup> The Covenant of Redemption is the “one Testament of salvation.” The six subsequent covenants are different means the Lord used to bestow that covenant.

### **B. The Covenant with Adam**

God’s covenant with Adam is found in Genesis 1:26-2:25. Some call this covenant “The Covenant of Works.” Though the Hebrew word for covenant was not mentioned in the Genesis account, many of the elements of a covenant were. A binding relationship was enacted between the Lord and humankind. The Lord issued forth Law with severe consequence for covenant violations of that Law (Genesis 2:16-17). The Lord also promised the blessing of life for obedience to God’s Law. God’s covenant with Adam was designed to spread the paradise of Eden all over the face of the Earth (Genesis 1:28-31).

Adam failed to adhere to the covenant God made with him. As a result, he received the punishment of physical and spiritual death. In God’s divine design, Adam served as a federal representative for all of humankind (Romans 5:12). Elements related to God’s Covenant of Works still have bearing on humanity. Marriage, family, procreation, Sabbath rest, and work are still an integral part of the human condition. However, sin and the consequences of sin have also been passed down to each descendent of Adam.

In the midst of Adam’s initial shame over sin, the Lord promised to send a Savior. One would come from woman who would crush Satan’s head and reverse the consequences of sin (Genesis 3:15). Whereas Adam had initially related to God through a covenant involving works, he would be given new life through the grace of God. In this way, the Covenant with Adam set the stage for the Covenant of Redemption and the other covenants that would follow.

### **C. The Covenant with Noah**

One of the most well-known biblical covenants is the one the Lord established with Noah. Cartoon depictions of Noah’s ark stuffed with animals are popular amongst children who grow up in church. Even many non-believers are familiar with the story of a catastrophic flood. Such was the case in antiquity as well. It seems that reports of Noah’s flood spread throughout the world, as many other civilizations created stories that told a tale similar to the one we read of in Genesis 6:1-10:32.

While there are many things we could say about God’s covenant with Noah, two ideas require emphasis for our study. First, God’s covenant with Noah demonstrated the Lord’s hatred for sin. Why did the flood come upon the Earth in the first place? Genesis 6:5 tells us: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” The Noachic Covenant reminds us that “none is righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10). It also reminds us that “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation” toward sin “every day” (Psalm 7:11).

Second, God’s Covenant with Noah reveals God’s purposes of preservation. Through the flood incident, the Lord demonstrated his purposes to preserve a remnant

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<sup>12</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 492.

of people for himself. He covenanted to never duplicate the disaster he brought upon the Earth through the flood. Genesis 8:21-22 contains the stipulations of the covenant: "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." Through the Noahic Covenant, the Lord exhibited common grace toward all of humanity. Even unbelievers enjoy the seasons and the cycles of the Earth, along with the life-sustaining harvests of the Earth.

God's Covenant with Noah also provided a preview of the special deliverance God's people would experience. The door in Noah's ark was a type of Jesus (John 10:9). It pointed to the Anointed One who would function as the door of life, providing deliverance from the wrath of God's end-time judgment upon the Earth (Revelation 19:11-15). This was in keeping with the promise from the Garden of Eden that told of the way life would be provided through the seed of woman (Genesis 3:15, 20-21).

The "bow" that is famously associated with Noah's flood was a symbol of battle in Noah's day. Bows were used to strike down one's enemies. The Lord hung a bow in the sky after Noah's flood to give a testament to the fact that he had hung up his bow of warfare against humanity. The Lord promised to stay his hand of catastrophic judgment until the end of the Earth. It is worth noting that the Lord repeated the promise associated with the Noahic Covenant when dealing with apostate Israel (Isaiah 54:9-10). God's covenant after the flood was designed to point to his grace and his providential works of preservation.

#### **D. The Covenant with Abraham**

The book of Genesis contains yet another covenant. In Genesis 12, we read of the way the Lord called one named Abram to a special task: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing'" (Genesis 12:1-2). Notice that the establishment of a nation is central to God's covenant with Abram.

The details associated with the life of Abram are shared from Genesis 12:1 to Genesis 25:18. God's covenant with Abram is spelled out in Genesis 15:1-6 and 17:1-14. There are several features that are unique to the Abrahamic Covenant — the promise of an heir, the promise of land, and the sign of circumcision. However, the primary feature of the Abrahamic feature is the promise of a nation.

Through God's dealing with the man, the Lord covenanted to establish a nation that would serve as a vehicle to deliver the Anointed One of Genesis 3:15 to Earth. The nation served as a sort of hedge of protection from the world and the Evil One who had previously tried to stamp out the seed of woman (Genesis 4:1-16; 6:1-4). It is for this reason that the Lord changed Abram's name to Abraham. The man's new name meant "father of a multitude" (Genesis 17:5). Interestingly, the early church preached about God's covenant with Abraham, as they saw it as a pivotal part of God's program of redemption (Acts 7:1-8).

#### **E. The Covenant with Moses**

God's covenant with Moses built upon God's covenant with Abraham. Whereas Abraham was promised a nation, Moses was given laws in order to protect and preserve that nation. Passages that detail God's covenant with Moses include, but are

not limited to, Exodus 6:1-13; 19:1-25; and 24:1-18. Two types of laws are unique to the Mosaic Covenant — Ceremonial and Civil Laws. The former gave rules and regulations for ritualistic worship. The latter gave laws for the governance of the nation. While on Earth, Jesus affirmed the place, purpose, and priority of such laws (Matthew 5:17; 23:23-24).

The intent behind these laws was to keep Israel pure from other nations. However, these laws also contained innumerable symbols and shadows that pointed to the coming of Christ and the work Christ would perform on behalf of sin (Colossians 2:16-23). It is important to note that the Lord enacted strict consequences for disobedience to such laws (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Israel's failure in this regard would eventually set the stage for the appearance of the Anointed One (Galatians 4:4).

#### **F. The Covenant with David**

In the context of national Israel, and subsequently in the context of God's covenants with Abraham and Moses, God established a covenant with a man named David. The Lord anointed the man and made him king over the nation. Old Testament and New Testament authors alike referred to him as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). David was the Lord's chosen king; however, the Lord had plans for David that extended far beyond the man's tenure on the throne of Israel.

The Lord covenanted with David to provide a future king within his lineage that would rule over an everlasting kingdom. The details of this covenant are spelled out in 2 Samuel 7:1-17. It is worth noting that the New Testament authors frequently regarded Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant with David (Matthew 1:17-20). Jesus is the king who will one day rule in righteousness over all the Earth (Revelation 21:1-4).

#### **G. The New Covenant**

All the covenants find fullness in the New Covenant. One has said, "By the new covenant, all the promises of God find their consumption...The new covenant does not appear in the promises of the Old Testament as some novelty previously unknown to God's people. Instead, the new covenant represents the collection of all the old covenant promises...."<sup>13</sup> The Lord promised a new covenant hundreds of years in advance through the prophets: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).

According to Jeremiah, the New Covenant is centered on hearts being made new by God so that human hearts might fully fulfill God's Law. Prior to the New Covenant, the differing works aspects of other covenants were used to prove that no human heart could fully fulfill God's Law. Jesus emphasized the place of heart obedience to God's Law in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48). He also spoke of God's intent for his people to have hearts that fully obey God's Law through the famous Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). The conversion of the human heart in the New Covenant is based on two primary realities: the offering of Christ as a sacrifice for sins and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus instituted the New Covenant through his first Lord's Supper with his disciples (Matthew 26:26-29).

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<sup>13</sup> Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Covenants*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1980), 42.

### 3. CONSUMMATION

The seven aforementioned covenants form the storyline of Scripture. But they do more than that. They accomplished God's plan of redemption. Scripture tells of the end result of the seven covenants in Revelation 21-22. In those chapters, we read of the eternal state that will be enjoyed in the New Earth. In one sense, the eternal state will function like a Garden of Eden, Part Two. One has said, "Heaven is old Eden purged and perfected."<sup>14</sup>

#### Conclusion

I hope you know that we have not discussed the covenants out of mere Scriptural curiosity. Nor have we discussed them as we might for a normal Bible study. Our purpose here has been to look at the covenants from a high level in order to understand how they provide the skeletal structure for the story of Scripture. As you read and study the Bible, it is imperative that you realize you are reading a unified story. One has explained, "The cumulative evidence of the Scriptures points definitely toward the unified character of the Biblical covenants. God's multiple bonds with his people ultimately unite into a single relationship. Particular details of the covenants may vary. A definite line of progress may be noted. Yet the covenants of God are one."<sup>15</sup>

Keep these things in mind as you use the storyline of the covenants in your Bible study and reading. Remember the big idea of each covenant. Adam teaches us about God's designs for humanity, sin, and God's plan of salvation. Noah highlights the Lord's plans of preservation. Abraham is all about a nation being established for Messianic purposes. Moses focuses on laws to preserve that nation and David points to a king that will come from that nation. The New Covenant is the full realization of God's plan of redemption.

The aforementioned high-level ideas will help you as you study and read Scripture. A chart has been provided below that provides a survey of key ideas associated with each covenant. Even a high-level understanding of the covenants will help you keep the big picture of Scripture in mind. It will also help you understand individual passages in light of their overall context. In addition, the themes of the covenants will help keep you from making classical interpretive mistakes that plague many. From the life of Peter, we have examples of how easy it is to make missteps in one's Christian beliefs and behavior because of a misunderstanding of God's covenants. Did not an erroneous view of the Mosaic Covenant lead him to legalistic practices regarding food (Galatians 2:11-12)? Also, it likely that a misunderstanding of the Davidic Covenant prompted him to unsheathe his sword at Jesus' arrest (Mark 14:47).

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, Hywel. The Lamb is the Lamp (Revelation 21:23). *The Banner of Truth Magazine: 705*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Robertson, 28.

Covenant	Text(s)	Big Idea(s)	Key Concepts
<b>REDEMPTION</b>	Revelation 13:8	<b>Program:</b> God has a program of securing a people for himself.	Trinitarian Agreement, Overarching Umbrella or Container for All Covenants. This is the overall story of Scripture.
<b>Adam</b>	Genesis 1:26-3:24	<b>Purpose, Problem, and Promise:</b> God's people have a purpose, a problem, and a promise	Life, Image of God, Work, Marriage, Family, Sin, the Anointed One, Adam as a Federal Representative for All Humanity
<b>Noah</b>	Genesis 6:1-10:32	<b>Preservation:</b> God will preserve humanity and his people.	Sin, Flood, Ark, Door, Bow
<b>Abraham</b>	Genesis 15:1-6; 17:1-14	<b>People:</b> God chose the nation of Israel to be a vehicle through which he would deliver the Anointed One to Earth.	Nation, Land, The Sign of Circumcision, Gentile Inclusion, An Heir
<b>Moses</b>	Exodus 6:1-13; 19:1-25; 24:1-18	<b>Purity:</b> God enacted ceremonial and civil laws in order to keep Israel pure so that she might be a pure vessel for delivering the Messiah.	Ceremonial Law, Civic Law, Types, Shadows, Blessings for Obedience, Curses for Disobedience
<b>David</b>	2 Samuel 7:1-17	<b>Person:</b> God promises to send a king who will have an everlasting dominion.	King; Heir; Kingdom; Descendent of David; Everlasting Reign
<b>New Covenant</b>	Jeremiah 31:33; Matthew 26:26-29	<b>Promise Fulfilled:</b> Christ's blood and body are given to secure a people for the Lord.	The Body and Blood of Jesus; Regeneration and the Holy Spirit

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. How might the storyline of Scripture help you in your Bible reading and Bible study? Does seeing Scripture according to the 3 C's we've mentioned help you?
2. How does an understanding of the covenants aid you in your Bible study? What errors might it help you avoid?
3. What did you learn in this lesson?
4. What are some mistakes you have made, or you have witnessed others make, in misinterpreting certain texts of Scripture because of a misunderstanding of the covenants?