

IX 9Marks



WHAT DOES GOD WANT OF US ANYWAY?

A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

MARK DEVER

“Mark Dever is an able and sure guide to the message of the Bible, which tells us what God wants of us all. The reader of this book is in reliable hands because the author depends not on himself but on the Word of God to answer life’s greatest questions. We cannot live lives that please God unless we know what God has said about himself and about us. This book will help you to know God through knowing his Son revealed in his Word.”

Thabiti Anyabwile, Pastor,
Anacostia River Church, Washington, DC;
author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

“In this fantastic little book, Dever shows us what it means to say that Jesus Christ is the point of the Bible. He offers us a breathtaking, panoramic view of Scripture. Since the message of the Bible is so important, and since Dever has captured that message so succinctly, I’ll give this book away again and again—both to Christians eager to get a sense of the whole and to seekers wondering just what the Bible is all about.”

Aaron Menikoff, Senior Pastor,
Mount Vernon Bible Church, Sandy Springs, Georgia

“The Bible’s size and complexity can overwhelm many new readers. Mark Dever’s friendly overview both provides a map to its complexity and downsizes its message to the heart of the matter—what is the passion of God’s heart? Keep a bunch of these at your church for giving to anyone unfamiliar with the grand narrative of God’s Word.”

Matt Schmucker, Executive Director, 9Marks; Elder,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

**WHAT DOES GOD
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ANYWAY?**

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To
Annie and Nathan

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INTRODUCTION

THE BIG PICTURE

Have you heard of the *Above* series of large coffee-table photography books? There is *Above Washington* and *Above London* and *Above Europe* and many others. I enjoy the series because of the sweeping panoramas it provides. The plans of the original city planners, hidden when walking down the streets with building tops high overhead, suddenly become visible as the pictures let us rise up and look down on the whole. The aerial photographs provide a sense of perspective and interrelatedness, and we see what the planners envisioned in their minds and blueprints.

Clearly, the sense of the whole is important for understanding and for planning. Some people suggest the ecology movement did not begin until the first pictures of the whole earth, taken from space, were published around 1970. Wasn't it on the cover of the old *Whole Earth Catalog*? Seeing a photograph of the earth, I think, jelled our understanding of the world as a whole and galvanized certain individuals to action. In the same way, we want, in the three studies that follow, to pull up and get an "above the Bible" or "whole Bible" view all at once.

Or we might consider the concept of time-lapse photography. In time-lapse photography, the photographer positions the camera to take a shot of the same location multiple times over the course of a day. That allows him to see the changes that occur in one place over a long period of time in just a few moments of flipping through pictures. Reading through the Bible has the same effect. The Bible is, of course, much briefer than what it records. I know it would take you a long time to read it, but it would take you much less time to read it than it took to write it; and it took less time to write it than it took for the events to happen. So the text of Scripture itself is already like a time-lapsed series of photographs. And we want, in the course of the three studies that follow, to flip through an even more condensed series of pictures that present the message of the whole.

The three studies that you can see on the contents page—The Message of the Whole Bible, The Message of the Old Testament, and The Message of the New Testament—began their life as three sermons that I preached to my church, Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Then, several years later, we edited them to read more like chapters in a book and published them together with my “overview sermons” on every book of the Bible. The first two messages appeared in my book *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Crossway, 2006), while the third appeared in the companion volume *The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* (Crossway, 2005).

Now, Crossway has seen fit to publish just the three studies in one volume, which I pray you find useful.

Since they began as sermons preached at different times, you will find some overlap between them. Still, my hope is that you will find that each presents the burden of the material. God gives life through his Word. He created the world through his Word, and he recreates his people through his Word (Gen. 1:3–4; Ezek. 37:1–10; Rom. 10:14–17; 2 Cor. 4:1–6). Therefore, good preaching is nothing more or less than speaking the burden of God's Word, relying on the Spirit to impress this message into the hearts of sinners. Whether the text you choose to teach is one verse or one Testament, good preaching aims to communicate the burden of that text. What's the burden of the whole Bible? I try to answer that question in *The Message of the Whole Bible*. What's the burden of the Old Testament? Again, I try to explain that in *The Message of the Old Testament*. And then I try to do the same in the study on the New Testament.

It's been an immeasurably rich experience for me to try to gaze upon what God has for his people in each Testament as well as the whole Bible. Hopefully, these studies will encourage you to do the same. And where I fail to do Scriptures justice, maybe you will be inspired to do a better job!

Before we continue, let me mention several good resources for helping you understand the Bible further. First, J. I. Packer's *God Has Spoken* will help you understand why you should study and read the Bible as a Christian.¹ Second, whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian, Chris Wright has written a great little book called *User's Guide to the Bible* that will help you know what the Bible contains.² It has pictures

¹J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979).

²Chris Wright, *User's Guide to the Bible* (Belleville, MI: Lion, 1984).

and timelines and bright colors, and it is so very thin! It is a wonderful resource. Finally, Graeme Goldsworthy's little *Gospel and Kingdom*, which comprises the first of three works in his *Goldsworthy Trilogy*, is one of the best treatments of the storyline of the whole Bible.³ In all of Scripture, Goldsworthy contends, God is bringing his people into his place under his rule.

³Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1981); *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 2000).

THE MESSAGE OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

1. One Great Story of Promises Made and Promises Kept
 2. A Particular History
 3. A Passion for Holiness
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- Conclusion: Believing God's Promises
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ONE GREAT STORY OF PROMISES MADE AND PROMISES KEPT

The Bible has been the subject of numerous and varying opinions.

Many people have not liked it. The great French philosopher Voltaire predicted the Bible would vanish within a hundred years. He said that more than two hundred years ago—in the eighteenth century. His kind of skepticism may have been rare when he lived, but it became more commonplace in the following century. One historian writes, “By the nineteenth century Westerners were already more certain that atoms exist than they were confident of any of the distinctive things the Bible speaks of.”¹ By the twentieth century, great sections of the formerly “Christian” parts of the world had fallen into official skepticism about the Bible. *A Dictionary of Foreign Words*, published by the Soviet government about fifty years ago, defined the Bible as, “A collection of different legends, mutually contradictory and written at different

¹Huston Smith, “Postmodernism and the World’s Religion,” in Walter Truett Anderson, ed., *The Truth about the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World* (New York: Putnam’s, 1995), 205.

times and full of historical errors, issued by churches as a 'holy' book."

At the same time, many people have had a very high opinion of the Bible. Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century, described the Bible beautifully when he said, "As in paradise, God walks in the Holy Scriptures seeking man." Immanuel Kant once stated, "A single line in the Bible has consoled me more than all the books I have ever read." Daniel Webster said of it, "I pity the man who cannot find in it a rich supply of thought and of rules for conduct." Abraham Lincoln called it "the best gift God has given to man." He also claimed, "But for it we could not know right from wrong." Theodore Roosevelt said, "A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education." Certainly one of the most profound understandings of the Bible comes from the great Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, who attested, "Give a man an open Bible, an open mind, a conscience in good working order, and he will have a hard time to keep from being a Baptist."²

Some people believe they have great faith in the Bible, yet their sincerity is no guarantee of understanding. King Menelik II, the emperor of Ethiopia a hundred years ago, had great faith in the Bible. Whenever he felt sick, he ripped a few pages from the holy book and ate them! This was his regular practice, and it never did seem to harm him. He was recovering from a stroke in December 1913, when he began to feel particularly sick. He asked an aide to tear out the complete books of 1 and 2 Kings and feed them to him page by page. He died before he could eat both books. Whether

²Everett Gill, *A. T. Robertson: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 181.

you like the Bible or not, it has certainly been popular. It is an all-time bestseller. Polls show that Americans generally say they believe the Bible.

Yet the book is probably more purchased than read. Most Americans may not have the gastronomic fervor of King Menelik, which is just fine; but they may also have less knowledge of the Bible than he did. Pollster George Gallup reports:

Americans revere the Bible, but they don't read it. And because they don't read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates. Four Americans in five believe the Bible is the literal or inspired Word of God, and yet only 4 in 10 could tell you that it was Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount and fewer than half can name the Four Gospels. . . . The cycle of biblical illiteracy seems likely to continue—today's teenagers know even less about the Bible than do adults. The celebration of Easter . . . is central to the faith, yet 3 teenagers in 10—20 percent of regular churchgoing teens—do not even know why Easter is celebrated. The decline in Bible reading is due in part to the widely held conviction that the Bible is inaccessible and less emphasis on religious training in the churches.³

It is exactly such ignorance we hope to help remove with this study. You or I may not be able to learn everything about Christianity in one fell swoop. In fact, I am certain we cannot. But I do hope to bring your attention to the overarching theme of the Bible as well as the basic message of Christianity, or what is called “the gospel.”

³Cited by Michael S. Horton, “Recovering the Plumb Line,” in John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 259.

Many people are surprised to hear that the Bible has any sort of overarching theme or story. It is well known as a collection of books. As one Bible scholar put it:

No less than sixty-six separate books, one of which consists itself of one hundred and fifty separate compositions, immediately stare us in the face. These treatises come from the hands of at least thirty distinct writers, scattered over a period of some fifteen hundred years, and embrace specimens of nearly every kind of writing known among men. Histories, codes of law, ethical maxims, philosophical treatises, discourses, dramas, songs, hymns, epics, biographies, letters both official and personal, vaticinations. . . .

Their writers, too, were of like diverse kinds. The time of their labors stretches from the hoary past of Egypt to and beyond the bright splendor of Rome under Augustus. . . .

We may look, however, on a still greater wonder. Let us once penetrate beneath all this primal diversity and observe the internal character of the volume, and a most striking unity is found to pervade the whole. . . . The parts are so linked together that the absence of any one book would introduce confusion and disorder. The same doctrine is taught from beginning to end. . . . Each book, indeed, adds something in clearness, definition, or even increment, to what the others proclaim.⁴

Clearly, the Bible is made up of many parts. Yet this book is one whole: “utter diversity in origin of these books, and yet utter nicety of combination of one with all.”⁵ It tells one great story.

⁴B. B. Warfield, “The Divine Origin of the Bible,” in *Revelation and Inspiration*, The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 1:436–37.

⁵Ibid., 437.

The storyline that we will follow—and the outline of the next six chapters—is the story of promises made and promises kept. God makes promises to his people in the Old Testament, and he keeps his promises in the New Testament. This message of promises made and promises kept is the most important message in all the world, including for you. Maybe you will “get it” in this study. Or maybe it will get you. As Martin Luther said, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me.” I pray that happens to you.

IX 9Marks

Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1 Expository Preaching**
- 2 Biblical Theology**
- 3 A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4 A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6 Biblical Church Membership**
- 7 Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8 Biblical Discipleship**
- 9 Biblical Church Leadership**

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and other resources at
www.9Marks.org**

"This book will help you to know God through knowing his Son revealed in his Word."

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"Dever shows us what it means to say that Jesus Christ is the point of the Bible. Since the message of the Bible is so important, and since Dever has captured that message so succinctly, I'll give this book away again and again."

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