

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 2: GENESIS

The famous Route 66 in America was a continuous road which stretched nearly two and a half thousand miles from Chicago in the North East of the country to Santa Monica in California, the most western state on the continent. Before the arrival of sat navs people had to rely on signposts to make sure they were heading in the right direction if they wanted to travel the whole length of the route. So, this is an appropriate image for our studies because the 66 books of the Bible take us on one continuous journey starting in Genesis to leaving at our destination in Revelation. In the time we have, I can only identify for you the signposts that point to the most important landmarks that will reappear time and time again as you travel this route. And as we follow the signposts and view those Old Testament landmarks, God-willing, you will begin to know, understand and appreciate the sheer magnitude of the scope of God's plans and purposes for this planet.

As you will know Genesis is not just the first book in the Bible, but the first book of the five books of the Torah or Pentateuch, which is regarded as having been written by Moses during the 40 years the Israelites were in the wilderness. It was written specifically for the Israelites because as a people, they had spent some 400 years as foreigners in a pagan country. And they were heading to another unknown, alien and pagan territory. The Genesis accounts gave the Israelites back their sense of identity through the records of their ancestors. More importantly, it gave them the knowledge of their religious heritage worshipping One God, which was in complete contrast to the pagan cultures they had come from and were going to. Secondly, what was written for them, has a direct bearing on Christianity today. Their history is also our history. As we travel our route we will see that Genesis is what some commentators have called a 'seed-bed', not just of what is subsequently recorded in Scripture, but also of the state of our planet through the ages. As one Christian writer has put it:

Genesis is the beginning of creation, the human race, marriage, the family, the state, nations, civilization; the history of law, government, penalty; of worship, covenant, the call to God, the elect people; promise and prophecy; language and literature, mechanic arts, fine arts, science and poetry.

Given that this statement is not an exaggeration of the content of the book of Genesis, you can see why I can only point out the main landmarks to serve as a guide through its 50 chapters.

Because, I will frequently mention that the primary purpose and goal of all Bible study is to learn all we can about every aspect of God, it should come as no surprise that our first landmark in Genesis is God, Himself. "In the beginning God...". All the major landmarks on the rest of our route follows from the revelation of the existence of God. We often bypass the first three words of Genesis because they are taken so much for granted by Christians. But this revelation is the first and foundational tenet of our faith. It is the first revelation of the Person of God which will grow and develop through the pages of the Bible to give us the understanding of the triune God that we have today. We will not be able to grasp all that follows unless the seed of God's existence is firmly and irrefutably planted in our hearts and minds. Christians reject the pernicious theory of evolution because, in its essence, a belief in evolution is a denial of the existence of God.

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These three words are also God introducing Himself to us using the name Elohim, which means ‘supreme God, the strong One.’ This name is used 2,570 times in Scripture, and each time it refers to His sovereign power, His strength and His might. You will find 9 more names of God in Genesis, each one revealing another aspect of His Person and character. God and His names are one and the same. The principle established by this fact is that the name of God is sacred and therefore is not to be used casually, carelessly or in the form of blasphemy. The way you treat God’s name is a reflection on your perception of God.

For example, ‘Lord God’ in Genesis 2:4 ; Yahweh in 4:3; El Shaddai, God Almighty (17:3; 28:3; 35:11). In Genesis 14:19 He is El Elyon Genesis 16:13 El Olam, the Everlasting God. El Elohe Yisrael (33:20), the God of Israel; Abir Jacob, the Mighty One of Israel. 4:26: 12:8 c/f 13:4 altar at Bethel: El Roi 16:13; Yahweh Jireh (22;14).

**Genesis 4:26 (NIV) Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh.
At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord.**

Genesis 21:33 (NIV) Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.

Genesis 35:14-15 (NIV) Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. 15 Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.

A study of God’s names in Genesis also combine to define God as an Almighty, supreme, sovereign deity in total control of all that happens in the world He created. And by the time of Adam’s grandson this fact was being recognised by those who lived in that undatable period of time. We find the first mention calling on the name of the Lord in the time of Seth’s son Enosh. What God had revealed to various people at various times through the use of names led to worship of Him. Later that fact was literally evidenced in stone when altars were built to the Lord at Bethel and Beersheba. Bethel means ‘house of the Lord’ hence its popularity as a name for churches in our own day.

A second significant feature of this landmark is God’s revelation of Himself in creation. His almighty power is demonstrated by creation coming into being by just His word. Ten times in the first chapter of Genesis we read, ‘God said’ and creation happened. We tend to see these chapters in terms of the order of creation and man made in God’s image. But turn your minds to the ‘big picture’ or, if you prefer, ‘the finished product. The combination of all the details in the first two chapters give us God’s vision of the world He planned for His human creation. A perfect natural environment, its relationship to humanity based on the attentive care of the man and woman whom God had entrusted to carry out this task. And then a direct and intimate relationship between God, Adam and Eve. God’s world vision was one of peace, harmony and well-being founded on the dependence of humanity on God, and the dependence of nature on human care. It is this vision revealed by God through creation that has inspired the hopes and expectations of God’s people from that time right up to the present day. The hope is for the restoration of that perfect and direct relationship with God in an

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eternal perfect environment and, given God's sovereign power, we know we have been given a privileged glimpse of God's ultimate plan for His people in this account.

The next landmarks in Genesis clearly show that God planned the short, medium and long term strategy it bring that plan to fruition. Adam and Noah are included in our second landmark because they belong to a period which cannot be dated. Yet it is God's interaction with these two families that shapes the religion and culture that will lead to all the future development of the world both positively and negatively. That is because, both families were the progenitors of the only two classes of people God recognises in our world – those who are for Him and those who are against Him. The tragedy is that it didn't have to be like that.

God gave Adam and Eve only one prohibitory command. Don't eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were left with the choice to obey or disobey and you all know the choice they made. In effect, they were traitors, because they chose to take the side of Satan, God's enemy from before the world began. Two enduring facts of life emerged from this episode. The first was that the battle between good and evil, between God and Satan was to be fought in this world for the souls of men, women and children. The eternal destiny of the souls of every human being would depend on whether they obeyed whatever light God had given in their lifetimes, or disobedience which put the people, now called sinners, firmly in Satan's camp. The reward for obedience would be salvation and the ultimate restoration of that eternal existence revealed in Genesis where followers of God would live in eternal bliss. The penalty for disobedience would be exclusion from it. Those two facts of life will remain until the end of time. The first tragedy that ensued was that the sin of the first man led to the second man committing the murder of the third man. Blood was spilt by violence and Cain became the father of one of the two camps that would manifest who belonged to God and who did not.

Two clear lines emerge from God's promise to Eve that her 'seed' or offspring would carry forward the promise of redemption from sin and death that disobedience had brought into the world. Genesis clearly states that Seth was given in place of Abel the son who had pleased God with His sacrifice. Seth became the ancestor of Noah and we are given no detail of the exploits of Seth's line. But it becomes obvious that this was a God-fearing line because Enoch, who did not die, was a descendant of Seth, as was Methuselah who lived for 969 years. The line of Seth thus marks a time of spiritual awakening. In contrast, Cain's descendants are credited with introducing steps in the progress of civilization, the order of which still is recognised today. For example, ancient man became tent-dwellers and herders. We recognise the bronze and iron ages, and here there is mention of these kinds of tools in that order. Cities and arts like music added to the progress. These details may seem irrelevant, but bronze and iron are mentioned frequently in the Bible, again in both literal and symbolic form. And cities, which will be mentioned shortly, became symbolic of gross sin and immorality.

Accompanying Adam on this landmark is Noah. By Noah's time the sin that had entered the world with Adam and manifested itself first in the violent murder of Abel, had become so heinous that God regretted creating the world and decided to destroy it. Among those destroyed were Cain's direct descendants, so Cain's line died out completely at this time. The

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principle of severe penalty for disobedience and salvation for obedience to God could not have been demonstrated more clearly by the flood covering the earth.

Noah's obedience, which rendered him righteous in God's sight, not only saved himself and his family from destruction. It was endorsed by the first explicit covenant God made with a person, revealing Himself as the covenant God who keeps His promises.

Genesis 9:8-15 (NIV) Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 9 "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you 10 and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.

We all know God promised never again to destroy the earth by flood and gave the rainbow as a sign of that covenant, but seldom are events after the flood mentioned. Noah's family became the progenitors of all the peoples who appear in the pages of the rest of the Old Testament. The actions of Noah's youngest son led to a curse which had far reaching consequences for those who would eventually become God's chosen people. Canaan, the son of Ham not only gave his name to the land he settled in, but was also the ancestor of the Canaanite tribes like the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites and others that you will meet again on the next stage of our route. Nimrod, the grandson of Ham, is connected to the building of cities. Of these Babylon and Nineveh in Assyria will materialise in literal and symbolic forms as arch enemies and destroyers of God's people. And the one incident that highlights this anti-God line is the Tower of Babel incident. This was a blatant attempt of arrogant humanity to make itself a god. The incident took place in the region of Babylon and God's scattering of language was another major example of how judgement would come when pride and defiance of God incurred just punishment.

After Noah we come to one of the most prominent figures in the Old Testament for the line of Shem, Noah's eldest son, takes us to the birth of Abraham. We do not know exactly the time line for this, but from the time of Abraham we begin to have a creditable estimate of a historical timeframe. It is important, however, to see that in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, that undatable period before Abraham, all that would determine how the world would work in the future as regards the battle between good and evil, between God's way and Satan's way, had already been put in place. What had been established by all that Genesis has told us prior to the arrival of Abraham on the scene is that God's sovereignty had prevailed over how the world developed in its earliest stages. In particular, the promise that Eve's seed would eventually produce a Saviour, had been fulfilled through the preservation of a line of people that would grow and develop into the kind of community He was planning and purposing to

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share eternity with. We may find genealogies tedious reading, but they clearly show the demarcation of the two lines of people, the same division that exists in our world today. The genealogy of Jesus given in the first chapter of Matthew takes His ancestry back to Abraham. In other words, the ancestry of Abraham given in Genesis is that of the Lord Jesus Christ as well. Luke is even more emphatic for in chapter three, he gives Jesus' ancestry right back to Adam through the line of Seth. And from the covenant with Noah of the preservation of our planet, confirms God, not just as the Creator of a reformed earth, but as its Sustainer as well. It also points us to the fact that this earth is the location where the overriding plans and purposes of God regarding salvation and judgement will be progressively revealed until they come to their ultimate climax.

From chapter 12 of Genesis, we reach a new landmark. There is concentration on one family only and all that affects the life of that family clan in the world they inhabit. Significant information here starts with Abraham's obedience which led to the second explicit covenant promising seed, land and blessing. All the promises determined the future course of his descendants in the Old Testament period. They further accentuate the divisions of Abraham's descendants in terms of spiritual, geographical and cultural choices. Overseeing all these developments is the more direct intervention of God in the affairs of these people, particularly the close personal relationship He has with Abraham. Arguably, it is this relationship and the covenant emanating from it, that is second only in importance to the coming of Christ into the world. That is because it establishes the foundation upon which a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ, becomes available to all believers.

It is important to spend a little more time at this landmark because of how it explains the basis of a personal relationship with God. We do not know how God communicated to Abraham the command to leave Ur. What is more important is that Abraham obeyed the command and that obedience becomes a characteristic trait throughout his life, even when it meant the sacrifice of his son. Another characteristic is that Abraham took God at His word, in spite of age making a legitimate heir impossible in normal circumstances. And it was Abraham's trust and reliance on God's word that engendered the faith that was credited to him for righteousness. Abraham had no law to follow. He only had God's word to him at various times. This is why he is the father of faith – God's word alone directed and guided his life. Abraham was not perfect by any means. He made mistakes, but in God's providence and grace, he remained in the will of God. His obedience to the will and commands of God would be the hallmark of the people of God for all time. Regardless of how God communicated these things to him, what Abraham saw and heard in his inner being, made him a man who walked by faith and not by sight.

In contrast to Abraham, we are given details of his nephew Lot. Here is the continuation of those who had no time for God. When Abraham and Lot had to separate because the land they had settled could not sustain both families,

Genesis 13:12-15 (NIV) Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. 13 Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.14 The Lord said to Abram after Lot

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had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.

Genesis 19:36-38 (NIV) So both of Lot’s daughters became pregnant by their father. 37 The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today. 38 The younger daughter also had a son, and she named him Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.

Lot was given the choice of what land to claim for himself. The choice he made was the location of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, even in those times, renowned for their immorality. The fact that God warned him to get out before the cities were destroyed and saved his life, however, did not prevent him contributing further to the paganism and immorality of the world at the time. Incest with his daughters produced the ancestors of the Moabite and Ammonite tribes, both of which would oppose the Israelites, with Moab featuring prominently in future prophesies against the nations in later books of the Old Testament. The contrast between these two men illustrate that every human action has consequences for good or evil. It illustrates God’s control of every circumstance, using even opposition to Him to clarify and illustrate that when He makes the fate of people dependent on submissive obedience to His will, He means what He says.

There are no exceptions to this principle.

Our next landmark, which concerns itself with the son, grandson and great-grandson of Abraham takes us to a further revelation of God’s ordering of the world. Although God’s covenant of seed was fulfilled with the birth of Isaac and the covenant of land was renewed, comparatively speaking, after the incident of him almost being sacrificed, Isaac’s role is more negative than positive. Also, a minor, but telling detail in his story is that the death of his wife Rebekah is not recorded. The deaths of both Sarah and Jacob’s wife Rachel are. Instead we are told of the death of Rebekah’s nurse Deborah. What appears to have sullied the reputation of Isaac is his attempt to pass the blessing of birthright to his eldest son Esau. This was done behind closed doors instead of as part of a public family celebration. Isaac was choosing to ignore God’s word to Rebekah that her younger son would serve the elder. However, doing so would have passed God’s covenant promises into the Canaanite world, for Esau had married a Canaanite woman in defiance of both Abraham and Isaac. To make matters worse, he then married into the clan of Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Hagar. But Ishmael was not the heir to the promise, Isaac was. This was something that had to be prevented, and although achieved through a deceptive conspiracy between Rebekah and Jacob, it was God’s sovereignty, that allowed the birth right to remain in the line He had determined would take His plans to their next stage. We cannot sympathise with Esau because in the beginning he had thought so little of what the heritage of his birth right entailed that he sold it to Jacob for a bowl of soup. He later became the ancestor of the Edomites, who would be hostile to God’s people and on whom God would adversely pass judgement.

We have to admit that when we read of Jacob’s deception of Esau and later of his father-in-law Laban, he does not come across as a true man of God. Yet, he was God’s choice, and taking in all the details of Isaac’s actions, we can see that the choice was justified according

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to God's will. We can also see that no person could claim they had become God's choice through their own efforts. In the family history of Abraham, in each generation, we see the birth right, in contravention to custom, passing to the younger son and not the elder. Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau and when it came to Jacob blessing of Joseph's sons, again it passed to the younger son Ephraim.

That Jacob was God's choice comes across in Genesis 32:22-32. Jacob had what might be described as a showdown with God. He had been both a conniving deceiver and the one deceived over his agreement with Laban about marrying Rachel. He doesn't come across as a particularly spiritual man, but it is obvious that God was working on him. Dreams and altars feature in his story. But the decisive moment came when he when a man wrestled with him. That person is not identified, but Jacob believed it was God Himself. Jacob came out of that encounter broken physically, but spiritually whole, and that is why his descendants carry on the line of those whom God chooses to represent Him in the world. Again we see God's sovereignty prevailing in all these events, even in the case of Jacob, bringing good out of evil.

But we cannot leave this stage of the route without stopping at a final landmark. That of Joseph and Judah. These two sons of Jacob play a significant role in the life of the people who will become the Israelites. Jacob's blessing for Judah, although not becoming a reality for many centuries, proved to be prophetic in terms of the genealogy of a future king and would give his name to the territorial location of the people through whom God would continue to reveal His plans and purposes for the whole of humanity.

Genesis 49:10 (ASV) The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh come: And unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be.

Genesis 37:3-5 (NIV) Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. 4 When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. 5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.

Genesis 37:26-28 (NIV) Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27 Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood."

Genesis 50:19-20 (NIV) But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

In the more immediate context of Genesis, Judah was instrumental in saving Joseph's life and, although sold as a slave, Joseph would later say what his brothers did was God's plan. This verse in the final chapter of Genesis shows us God can thwart the human intentions and actions and turn them to serve His purposes. Genesis reaches its climax with the resettlement of Jacob's whole family in Egypt. As we exit Genesis and follow the signpost

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taking us into the four books of Exodus to Deuteronomy, we come to the landmarks revealing the next stages of God's design of route 66.