

## **ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY**

### **ROUTE 66: LOOKING FORWARD: THE END FROM THE BEGINNING (Isaiah 46:10)**

‘The end from the beginning’. Yes, it is a weird title, but as you will see later, God said it and it makes a lot of sense. This week gives us a further breathing space after the breakneck speed through the 39 books of the Old Testament. It’s a time to ask what was this all about? Why did all of this have to happen before we get to the New Testament and salvation? It may surprise you to know that even the landmarks we will cover in New Testament in September are still only the means by which God is constructing the ‘Big Picture’ He has given us in the Bible. That is what scholars call the meta-narrative of the Bible. Now, only God has the complete blueprint for this project, and because that blueprint exists outside our human concepts of time and space, it would have been impossible for us take all of it in at once. That is why God has graciously revealed the details of it, stage by stage, according to what people, in their particular situations and stages of development, could understand. Cumulatively, these stages show the process of how He has planned to achieve His ultimate goals. Route 66 has been about following those stages landmark by landmark. So, it’s now an appropriate time to see how the Old Testament stages of our route have contributed to that meta-narrative. The Old Testament illustrates for us the effects of the fall for all humanity. In spite of being given millennia to obey the laws that would make them fit to enter into and enjoy the intimacy of the presence of God in a perfect environment like Eden, it became increasingly obvious that humanity was incapable of saving itself by this means. The hopes and expectation that the return of the exiles from captivity would bring in this new age failed to materialize. Hence, the focus turned to prophetic and apocalyptic visions of restoration to the conditions of Eden in sometime in the distant future. This was to be made possible through God providing a Messiah as a Saviour-Redeemer. It was through the Messiah that redemptive restoration to this state could be put on a different basis so that God’s plans could progress to their intended consummation.

However, alongside the illustration of the Fall through disobedience and rebellion and the rejection of God as ruler of His creation, the Old Testament’s meta-narrative shows that God’s intentions for His world and its people could not be thwarted. It is the Old Testament which introduces us to three indispensable aspects of that narrative which undergird, not just the Old Testament, but the message of the whole Bible from beginning to end. And these three issues challenge anyone who thinks that the Old Testament revelation is not important for Christians today because, in this talk, we will see how the end of the Bible refers back to the beginning of it. I said last week that modern evangelicals, in many ways, have lost sight of the awesomeness of the almighty, glorious Person of God. J.B. Philips summed it up well in the title of His book ‘Your God is too Small’. To correct that perception we need to go back to the Old Testament where we are introduced to the first Person of the Trinity, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is here we learn of a God who wants to create a kingdom on earth where He can dwell with His human creation. But obstacles arise, and the matter of the feasibility of the formation of this kingdom is thrown into doubt. The meta-narrative of the Bible overcomes that doubt and asserts that not only is it feasible, it is certain to become reality. God is in control and His kingdom will come.

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The reality and certainty of the coming of the eternal Kingdom of the Sovereign God rests on two foundational principles. The first is in the very first verse in the Bible and that is the existence of God. Christians take this very much for granted, but it is very important because the most controversial and unsolvable questions about the Bible records, are about the beginning and the end of our world. Yet, neither of these situations was ever a problem for people in Bible times because their perception of God's existence gave them all the explanation they needed.

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

**Psalms 90:1-2 (NIV) Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. 2 Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.**

**Isaiah 44:6 (NIV) This is what the Lord says— Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.**

**Isaiah 46:9-11 (NIV) Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. 10 I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.**

**Psalms 90:4 (NIV) A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.**

**Revelation 1:8 (NIV) "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." 22:13 (NIV) I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.**

I confess I felt a sense of shame when I looked at how the people of the Old Testament viewed God, especially when their view is vindicated in the last book of our Bibles. We human beings living on planet earth are bound by our perceptions of time and space. Just look at how Abraham over 3,500 years ago had a consciousness of a God who existed outside time and space. Knowing that was enough for Abraham. He was content to let God fulfil the His covenant promises to him in God's time and in God's way. This existence beyond the bounds of earthly vision were further recognised by David in the expression "from everlasting to everlasting" and in the words revealed to Isaiah – "the first and the last" and knowledge of "the end from the beginning". Psalm 90:4 shows the futility of trying to match our perception of time to that of God, when a day is like 1000 years in the Lord's sight or a 4-hour watch in the night. That is why the prophets, especially in the apocalyptic style of writing, could envisage God working out His purposes for the coming of His kingdom without questioning how or when He would do it. Their words are vindicated by wording in Revelation which expresses exactly the same sentiments. In the light of this, it is sheer human arrogance to present theories about when creation happened or when the world will end as empirical facts. The only empirical fact is that God has not revealed when He created the world and when He will bring it to an end. We need to let God get on with what He is continuing to do in this world without demanding He gives us every detail of His blueprint, especially as to how and when what He started and has purposed one day to come to fruition, will come to pass. Instead of hubris, we need the humility to admit like **Job 42:3 (NIV) ... Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.** For

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as God told Job – you are asking these questions without knowledge of what you are asking. The same words apply to us for, like Job, we do not possess any concept of what it is like to live beyond time and space.

The second principle that we need to pay more attention to is the revelation of God's transcendence.

**Exodus 15:11 (NIV) Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?**

**Psalms 24:8-10 (NIV) Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. ....10 Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty— he is the King of glory.**

**Isaiah 6:1-3 (NIV) In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”**

You know, when you compare this cold, clinical modern definition of the transcendence of God with the way the people of the Old Testament understood it, you can see how even hymns like 'How Great Thou Art' fall short of these heartfelt expressions of the awe and reverence with which God was viewed. “Majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders.: “The Lord of Glory”. “High and lifted up, just the train of His robe filling the temple – heavenly creatures singing Holy, Holy, Holy to the Lord Almighty whose glory fills the whole earth.” Isaiah's picture language and many texts appearing throughout Scripture express God's quality of being superior in every way. A sense of being wholly other in respect of the holiness which is totally alien to human nature. Like the concept of God's existence, the concept of His transcendence takes us beyond our understanding. But there is good news about both. If you want a graphical illustration of what Isaiah saw and heard in heaven, read Revelation chapter 4 and let it feed your vision of the transcendence of God. Human language reaches its limit in those few verses. This is but a blurred glimpse of what we will one day see and experience when God's kingdom is established on the renewed heaven and earth. On that day, too, we will be living beyond time and space. We will come face to face with the transcendence of God and our response too will be the heavenly kind of worship that found expression first in these Old Testament texts.

And as we move from those things that are, at present, “too wonderful” for us to know, we can take comfort from the fact that the transcendence and otherness of God does not mean that He has distanced Himself from our world. In spite of the fact that these two principles went beyond human understanding, they were the foundations upon which the discernment of and beliefs about the purpose of God were based.

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**Job 36:5 & 42:1-2 (NIV) God is mighty, but despises no one; he is mighty, and firm in his purpose.....Then Job replied to the Lord: 2 “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.**

**Exodus 9:16 (NIV) But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.**

**Isaiah 46:9-11 (NIV) Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. 10 I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’.... What I have said, that I will bring about; what I have planned, that I will do.**

**Isaiah 55:11 (NIV) so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.**

These verses are emphatic. God speaks and it is done. The voice of God alone is sufficient to control the universe. God asserts that He alone is almighty and that absolutely nothing can stand in the way of His purposes being stopped by anyone or anything. Now as we look at, particularly, western society today, we can ask if these assertions were without foundation. In society at large, God’s word is blasphemed more than it is being positively proclaimed. We find the same situation in the Old Testament for the stages of Route 66 have even featured the contemptuous burning of the word of God written by Jeremiah to Jehoikim. So, are we really any different from the societies in which these words were first uttered? The same rejection of God and His ways, the same social evils, still prevail although they are manifested in different ways. The history of the peoples of Israel and Judah, in one sense, are our mirror image in terms of their virtues and vices. This history also shows that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, God was continually taking His purpose a step further towards its ultimate fulfilment.

However, it’s only when we view the meta-narrative of this purpose that we can see that it had not been derailed, and share in the confidence of those Old Testament writers who had such certainty about their belief in God’s power to achieve His aims. As mentioned, attempts to prevent God achieving His purpose began by disobedience in the Garden of Eden. God designed His human creation to increase and fill the earth with its descendants - Genesis 1:28. Had Adam and Eve not disobeyed the only command God gave them, we would be living in that perfect earthly environment today in the actual presence of God. But evil entered that world and attempts to prevent God’s purposes for both the earth and its inhabitants increased in intensity through the rebellion of God’s chosen people. Those attempts will continue for as long as this world lasts as more and more human beings aid and abet Satan in trying to stop God achieving His goals. At times, from evidence in the past, to what we see today, and envisage in the future, it will even seem like these attempts are succeeding. But view this purpose from the ‘Big picture’ in Revelation. Here is a picture of the Satanic instigated, world-wide combined anti-God forces ranged against God, His divine Warrior, Jesus Christ, His followers and the heavenly hosts. Who wins? And what is established after that victory? Then, compare the chief characteristics of the new heaven and

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the new earth with the chief characteristics of the Garden of Eden. They are exactly the same. God's original blueprint of His immediate presence dwelling in a perfect environment, ruling a kingdom where His people are a holy nation serving as priests in the temple-city of the New Jerusalem. They exist in the presence of God, in harmony with nature in a garden-city from which every form of evil will be excluded. Revelation is a God-given vision that confirms all that God revealed to Old Testament saints was authentic and true. Such was their confidence in His word that they had no hesitation to record in writing their hopes for the restoration of God's sovereign authority over His eternal kingdom, where He would dwell with His people forever.

And that brings us to the third important factor in the meta-narrative of the Bible especially in relation to the Old Testament – prophetic revelation.

**Deuteronomy 28:63-64 (NIV) Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess. Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known.**

**Jeremiah 14:13-15 (NIV) But I said, “Alas, Sovereign Lord! The prophets keep telling them, ‘You will not see the sword or suffer famine. Indeed, I will give you lasting peace in this place.’” 14 Then the Lord said to me, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds..... Those same prophets will perish by sword and famine”.**

**Zephaniah 1:14-16 (NIV) The great day of the Lord is near— near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry. 15 That day will be a day of wrath— a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness— 16 a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers.**

Confidence in God's word was the hallmark of the true prophets who faced many dangers and life-threatening situations to bring God's message to a rebellious people. True prophets were those recorded as being sent by God and/or endowed with the Spirit of God. Since God was the source of all truth, the message the prophets gave was certain to come true. The foundational message of the prophets concerned the choice that faced their audiences, a choice still facing us today. God was not going to force people to co-operate with Him to achieve His purpose. They were given a fundamental choice: rebel or oppose Me and face retribution. Repent and share in all the blessings of restoration in My kingdom. They had the choice to believe the truth of God from the lips of His prophets or the lies of the false ones. The text from Jeremiah is a prime example. The false prophets were proclaiming 'Peace in our time'. While Jeremiah was speaking the truth and warning of destruction by the Babylonians, the false prophets were deceiving people with lies about peace.

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On the negative side we see true prophecy spelling this choice out by telling people the nature of their rebellion at any given time, urging them to repent of all that displeased God and or face the retribution of judgement. Zechariah was among those who foretold this judgement Day of the Lord in apocalyptic language which depicted its terrors in pictures of natural disasters and the appearance of bestial creatures. Everything that the Old Testament prophets both said about the situation of their times in their forthtelling; and all they predicted about their own people and the surrounding nations in their foretelling have been fulfilled. As mentioned last week, the only exception is the eschatological establishment of the Kingdom of God in the new heaven and earth which they accepted would happen according to the days and times He had set by His own authority.

Although many of their messages were harsh and doom laden, there were also prophecies about the way things would be when God's purpose was completed. These, too, were embedded in the route we have travelled over the last 10 weeks. Via the God-fearing line from Seth to Abraham and then via covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, God added to the earthly foundations of His purposed future eternal kingdom. These words from around two and a half to three thousand years ago find their confirmation again in the book of Revelation. The countless seed of Abraham finds expression in the countless number worshipping before the throne of God and the Lamb – Revelation 7:9. The Root of David and the Lion of Judah and rule with an iron sceptre are found in Revelation 5:5. & 19:15 The kingdom of priests serving God in white robes denoting their righteousness are mentioned in Revelation 1:6; 5:10 and 20:6. And the covenant with David of an everlasting kingdom and the promise to Ezekiel of a Shepherd-King is found in Revelation 3:7, 22:16 and 7:17 respectively. These references to Jesus from the Old Testament have to be viewed against the fact that none of the prophets knew that the Messiah would, in the fulness of time, appear on earth in the Person of Jesus Christ. It has been estimated that there are around 353 prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament, and again, all of these were fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

These **facts** explain why I have brought the very last book of the Bible into this summary of the Old Testament contribution to the meta-narrative contained in God's word. It was God in the Old Testament who said that **"I make known the end from the beginning"** and Revelation itself could be viewed as a fulfilment of that prophecy. Including Revelation shows that the principles concerning God's existence and transcendence, His overarching purpose for creating this world and its inhabitants, and the revelations He gave to the Old Testament prophets concerning the options open to humanity, are very relevant to Christianity today. Any time and/or effort in studying the Old Testament in the light of this 'Big picture' is never wasted. It reminds us that these things, too, were the bedrock of the beliefs of the writers of the New Testament. Had they not believed the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, Christianity would not exist today. Every time the prophets spoke of a coming Messiah as His appointed Servant, God was giving a foreknowledge of the means by which His purpose would be accomplished and His Name would be glorified. Their confidence was based on God's existence, transcendence and belief He could not fail to achieve what He had purposed. And while they longed for it to happen in their lifetimes, the apocalyptic language they used allowed them to be content to leave it to God when and how this would happen at some time in the distant future. Here are

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just two examples of their effect on scholarship today. 1635 pages of print in just two books. For the stand the Old Testament prophets took and for what they suffered for standing up for God deserves our unreserved respect and admiration. And for recording their words in whatever style of language, and their actual experiences, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we owe them an undying gratitude for they have shown us that although millennia have come and gone, our God is a faithful and unchanging God. It is His world and His purpose for its creation and the destiny of its inhabitants will be achieved in spite of all earthly appearances to the contrary.

And finally, the second reason for bringing Revelation into this talk is because its place as the last book in our canon is the most appropriate climax to the Bible's meta-narrative, the final stage of Route 66. It is the climax of this fascinating journey because it leads us to the answers to two of the most fundamental questions facing humanity. Those questions are: 'Why does this earth exist?' and 'What is the purpose of humanity?' The answer to the first question is simply: The earth exists because of God's unilateral decision to create it and His determination to restore it to the plans contained in its original blueprint. The most concise answer to the second question is given by the Westminster Confession of faith, which says that the purpose of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The beginning is glorifying God and enjoying Him in our lives, but the pinnacle of that will come when we meet Him face to face, living in His presence forever in His eternal kingdom. Thus, as has been shown, Revelation draws together the central motifs and themes of the Bible meta-narrative, together with those we will encounter on the New Testament stages of Route 66 in September. The end includes references to all that has happened from the beginning. You will probably hear me say several times that scholars have identified at least 200 and up to 500 allusions to Old Testament texts in the 22 chapters of Revelation. This fact strongly suggests that an understanding of the main motifs and themes in the Old Testament are an appropriate guide to give us a proper understanding of the message of the most controversial book in the Bible. It is further proof too that all parts of our Bible are connected and are leading us step by step to that day when we will look back and see that every word was both inspired and infallible. In that day we will see the truth of the words that this present heaven and earth will pass away, but God's word in the Old Testament and the New, never will.