

ROUTE 66: A ROAD TRIP THROUGH THE BIBLE

WEEK 1: STARTING OUT

Before starting the talk I want to say that this programme was not a solo effort. Thanks are due to the various contributions of Alan, Stuart, Deborah, Annette and Sinead, who have given shape and content to the series of talks. David and the deaconate are to be thanked for approving and facilitating all the aspects of the running of the programme. Then there are the ladies and gentlemen who have prepared the room and our refreshments and provided transport. And last, but not least, thank you for coming. I promise you, you will not regret this journey for we are travelling the route God wants us to take.

So let's make a start. As you are now aware, this 16-week series of talks are taking a different approach to Bible study. So different that, with sincere apologies to Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise, I had to borrow and switch his opening lines. Because they express an invitation to you to leave your scriptural comfort zones to boldly go into spaces of the Bible you have never gone before, or have only noticed in passing. It is an invitation to seek out new or renewed spiritual life through a greater knowledge of God and His ways; and explore new worlds of knowledge and understanding of the peoples, events and cultures that have made a contribution to the divine revelation contained in the pages of Scripture.

Now that may sound rather grandiose and far-fetched, but I can say with conviction, that what is contained in the Bible is like space. You will never reach its limits should you study it from the nanosecond of your first breath to the nanosecond of your final one. Think about space for a moment. From ancient to modern times, it has taken astronomers millennia to map the heavens, starting with what could be seen by the naked eye to what is now visible using the latest technology. It all started with seeing the sun and the moon and the visible stars and the phenomena associated with them. Then the discovery of the planets, asteroids, meteorites floating around in space, leading to the more recent discovery of black holes, dark matter, and now reaching beyond even what was known a decade or so ago. It was by mapping these space signposts, in the order in which they were discovered, that has led to the knowledge and understanding we have of the wonders of space in the present day.

When we return to earth we find that that is also the method of a terrestrial route 66 road trip. The scope of the Bible is so vast that we need to travel the road through it using the prominent scriptural signposts according to how and when God revealed them. God willing, these talks will provide you with the kind of information about those signposts that will enable you to move from one junction to the next with the kind of confidence that enables you to anticipate and look forward, hopefully, with great expectation and even excitement, to the next part of the journey.

Now, very sensibly, you may ask why embark on an trip through 66 books of the Bible when you will never come to the end of what you will discover there? Well, if people with vision and courage had not been prepared to venture into the unknown and push the frontiers of all aspects of our world, we wouldn't have the civilization we have today in the 21st century. Whether you regard this as a good thing or a bad thing, the fact remains that humankind has a natural instinct to find and reach beyond final frontiers. And there is no frontier so final as God's word because it is permanent and eternally unchanging.

Psalms 119:89 (NIV) Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

Isaiah 40:8 (NIV) The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

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Matthew 24:35 (NIV) Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Whereas earthly frontiers are being continually being reached and new ones identified, no matter how far you go, the frontiers of God's word will go on into an eternity without end. Human philosophies, ideologies, scientific hypotheses and even practical ways of doing things keep changing with the passage of time, but God word always remains the same. Some may argue that it should change with the times, but an honest, open-minded assessment and evaluation of God's word would convince even the most sceptical, that what we have in our Bibles is teaching that is relevant for all people, at all times and in all places.

That is because the Bible is a dynamic revelation given by a living God. It is the revelation given by a Triune Creator God, who desires a personal relationship with His human creation; and has put into motion a plan to save a people for Himself, with the ultimate purpose of bringing them into eternal, glorified fellowship with Him in a perfect environment, free from every taint of sin and evil. It is a single revelation given step by step through the books of the Old and New Testaments, with significant signposts and landmarks to show us the direction His plans and purposes are taking. In these texts we discover a God who uses this planet as the location for the working out of His plans. And He uses the channels of human personality, activity and history to tell us what He has done in the past, what He is doing now and what He intends to do in the future. Discovering all of that is the ultimate goal of all Bible study.

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.

Forget not that it is one and the same to believe in the Word, or in the person that speaks the Word.....See that you never separate the Word and the living God from each other. (Andrew Murray. The New life).

Andrew Murray's perceptive statement echoes what we find in throughout the Bible. In relation to planet earth, the first action of God in Genesis was not bringing light into being, but speaking. Ten times in the first chapter of Genesis we read that 'God said'. And what God said was done. Millennia later Isaiah tells us that God's word will accomplish what He sent it forth to do. Today, approximately two and a half thousand years after Isaiah wrote those words, the message of the Bible is still building a kingdom of God's people destined for eternal life. Today we have even better reasons for giving credence to Murray's assertion that the living God and the living word are one and the same.

John 1:1-2 (NIV) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, AND THE WORD WAS GOD. 2 He was with God in the beginning.

Hebrews 4:12 (NIV) FOR THE WORD OF GOD IS ALIVE AND ACTIVE. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

1 Peter 1:23 (NIV) For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, THROUGH THE LIVING AND ENDURING WORD OF GOD.

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“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” is frequently quoted and is an amazing fact. But an even more amazing one is contained in the first verse of the Gospel of John. The Word was God. No matter how you try to get around it, John in this statement is saying that God, the resurrected Christ and the Word are one and the same. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the writer to the Hebrews recognised the power of the Word to penetrate the deepest recesses of human life and make judgements accordingly. Peter attributes our very salvation through the living and enduring Word of God. And that is God’s ultimate plan and purpose for humanity. But we can only learn the details about who accomplished this and the what, when, where, why and how this was done through the revelation given to us in the pages of our Bibles. It is a revelation graciously provided by God for our benefit, and as such, to treat any part of it casually or to ignore it, is tantamount to treating God the same way.

For Christians, this belief in a living God and resurrected Saviour who was the embodiment of the word of God, should be the only reason we need to want to spend time and effort on increasing our knowledge and understanding of God’s word. Now, I will be the first to admit that there are many reasons why people find it difficult to study the Bible. The pressures of our lifestyles leave us with little time or energy. Add to that the fact that parts of the Bible are hard to understand and make reading a slog rather than a pleasure, and it is understandable why many Christians time and again go back to favourite passages and read only about the people and events they are familiar with.

And, while that is better than never giving any attention to the Bible at all, it robs us of many of the ‘unsearchable riches’ that are to be found throughout Scripture. For God wants us to see and experience the ‘big picture’ of what this living Word is all about. You see, coming to faith in Christ is only the start of our Christian journey. The purpose of giving us the Bible is to make us true disciples of our Lord. And true discipleship means following Jesus’ example in taking God’s word as seriously as He did.

Luke 4:8 (NIV) Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” Deuteronomy 6:13

Matthew 4:4 (NIV) Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on EVERY WORD that comes from the mouth of God.’” Deuteronomy 8:3

Matthew 15:7-9 (NIV) You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.” Isaiah 29:13

Mark 15:34 (NIV) And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lemasabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). Psalm 22:1

Luke 24:44 (NIV) He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Jesus told His disciples to ‘make disciples of all nations teaching them EVERYTHING (Matthew 28:20) that I have commanded you’. Bear in mind that His commands were a continuation and an updating of all that God had commanded in the Old Testament, and His expectations of His followers, are the same as what God expected of His chosen people in

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those times. Jesus told His disciples – if you love me, you will keep my commands. Simply put, Jesus, like God, expected absolute trust in and reliance on His word and obedience to it.

Logically, you cannot meet these expectations if you do not know God's word is, and it is the Old Testament that points the way for us. Jesus is our example here because the references He makes to the Old Testament during His ministry gives irrefutable proof that He knew His Scriptures. These are just 4 examples of that. "It is written" is clear evidence that when Jesus wanted to emphasise a truth, He used His own Scriptures. Those words defeated the temptation of the devil, the very one who had deceived Eve with lying words in the Garden of Eden. We read in the gospel of John that Jesus during His ministry declared that the devil was still the 'father of lies'. In these verses Jesus is quoting from the Torah, from the prophecy of Isaiah and from Psalms. As you read through the gospels you will find Him mentioning, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Jonah by name. In Luke 24, twice He summed up His total commitment to His Scriptures by asserting that His own life had been lived out in accordance with what God had already revealed in them. Although our Bibles are now divided into two parts with individual books divided into chapters and verses, for Jesus they were continuous writings inscribed on scrolls, and were a progressive revelation of all that God had planned and purposed for His creation.

Two further verses give another reason why we should see our Bibles as one single divine progressive revelation, rather than divided into two separate parts, together with the chapters and verses which were not designed by the original writers when they wrote their books.

John 12:49-50 (NIV) For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. 50 I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."

Matthew 5:17-19 (MSG) "Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. 18 God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. ...19 "Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honour in the kingdom.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV) ALL SCRIPTURE is God-breathed.....

An analysis of Jesus' recorded speech in the gospels shows that 10% of His words consisted of literally quoted Old Testament verses.¹ The text from John 12 indicates that God's authorisation prompted their use. In other words, God intended for His words given in the Old Testament to be as relevant in the New Testament era and beyond. Here in Matthew too, we have Jesus words about fulfilling in His Person all that God revealed in the Torah and in prophecy. Paul's words to Timothy is an emphatic reason why discipleship involves taking our Scriptures as seriously as Jesus took His. That means that we need to seek to know and understand the Old Testament to the same extent as we seek those from the New Testament. Remembering that the New Testament was not written when Paul wrote these words to Timothy, you can see the extent to which Paul regarded the Old Testament's relevance to the

¹ Dr Harry Rimmer quoted in Herbert Lockyer: How to Study the Bible. P67

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gospel he preached and taught. The same can be said for all the other New Testament writers.

Just as Jesus lived in perfect obedience to His Father's will, and as His disciples, we need know our Scriptures in order to do the same.

John 5:19-20 (NIV) Jesus gave them this answer: "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does...."

John 15:9-10 & 16:27 (NIV) As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love..... the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

1 John 2:5-6 (NIV) But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

The deeper we go into God's revelations in the Bible the more our lives will be prompted to conform to the image of Christ. That is because the motivation for discipleship is love. If, as said earlier, God and the Word cannot be separated from one another, then our love for God is reflected in our love for His Word. And the extent of that, in turn, is reflected by the time and effort we give to reading it and obeying what it teaches us. Now that is not meant to send anyone on a guilt trip. As also mentioned earlier, God knows that life today imposes on us necessary duties and pressures of various kinds, with the result that very often we are not able to call time our own. All God asks of us is that when we can call time our own, that we give some of it to the regular study of His word.

If we do, then we will begin grasp and appreciate just what God, through Christ, has saved us from and what He has saved us for. True discipleship stems from knowing the Scriptures the way Jesus knew His. They are our only guide to preparing us for all that God has already given us in Christ. Discipleship means we have handed our lives over to Him so that we can be the kind of people He will welcome into the eternal future planned for us. Discipleship in effect means changing your life.

Matthew 13:16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV) And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, THE WORD OF GOD, WHICH IS INDEED AT WORK IN YOU WHO BELIEVE.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV) All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

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Ephesians 2:10 (NIV) For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Because His word is a living word, He is actually speaking to us through it and shaping our lives in the here and now to fulfil His purpose for our individual lives. We saw a while back that Psalm 119 extolled the Torah, the Scriptures Jesus referred to when He explained His own mission. Both the Psalmist and Jesus brought their lifestyles into line with what those Scriptures were saying to them. It was only as the writers of the New Testament looked back that they too saw they were continuing in the footsteps of those who had heeded God’s word and had lived in obedience to it. Paul said that it was not he who lived, but Christ who lived in him. The Damascus Road experience changed more than Paul’s mind about the new religion being spread among the Jews. It completely changed his life and sent it off in a completely different direction and turned him into a missionary to the Gentiles. This is very significant because his understanding of what was taught in the Old Testament about the Messiah, he later used to argue the case for the gospel of Jesus Christ. For, example, that’s why he could speak with such confidence comparing the first Adam with Christ, the second Adam; and confronting his opponents in Galatia with the faith of Abraham as being the model of Christian faith and the only true way to salvation. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit Paul was given a profound insight into the divine revelations of the Old Testament and that, in turn, determined how he spent the rest of his life. This understanding also led to his still highly relevant and influential teaching about what our response should be to that event and the way it should transform our lives as we seek to follow Christ’s example.

Paul’s experience in Galatia was also a problem faced by Peter and John. It is this problem which still exists today that gives us another important reason for going deeper into God’s word.

Galatians 2:4-5 (NIV) his matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. 5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

2 Peter 2:1 (NIV) But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.

1 John 4:1 (NIV) Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

From the moment the gospel message began to spread throughout the Roman empire, there have been those that have sought to subject it to their own agendas. As Paul writes, this has even happened within the church. The only way to determine what is false teaching is to know true teaching. At the very beginning the verses quoted spoke of God’s word being eternally enduring; it would never pass away. So, in spite of the trillions, quadrillions or even quintillions of words that have been written, or are still to be written or spoken, God’s word will remain as the only words that will not change. Because they are unchanging they are the only yardstick by which all other theologies can be measured to learn what God’s truth is. Rick Warren said in one of his writings, “We need to study what is real in order to detect what is false.” Scientists use a litmus test to determine the acidity or alkalinity of an item.

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The result is regarded as decisive and irrefutable one way or the other. The Bible is the litmus test for what constitutes true Christian belief, faith and doctrine. Its revelation is even more definite for it is God Himself who has made the decision.

Those false teachers and false prophets are more prevalent in our 21st century world. We are justified in asking why they have emerged and why their beliefs and doctrines have not been faced with greater challenges from Christians.

2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV) Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

It is sad to say, that they can thrive because Christians have not heeded Paul's words to Timothy. We have not studied God's word enough to have the confidence of knowing we have correctly handled it. What does this actually mean? Well, most sects and cults flourish because they have not correctly handled the word of truth. They have taken words out of their proper contexts and have twisted them to fit into their own belief system.

Correctly handling the word of truth means keeping God's words in their proper contexts and seeing what they first meant to the people for whom they were written. And this brings us back to what was said at the beginning. We need to follow God's revelation step by step through the whole Bible. We need to see that revelation as a single unified revelation of the whole character and nature of God and His plans and purposes for this world. We need to see that each part of the Bible is connected to every other part, because each part contributes to the same divine revelation.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2 & 9 (NIV) Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. ...Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.....Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV) Therefore go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

John 14:25-26 (NIV) All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

A final reason for personal study of God's word is so that we can pass that knowledge on to others. That does not mean that we all have to become formal teachers. It means that when the opportunity arises that we are able to share our knowledge of God's word with others. We have Jesus' assurance that anything we have learned will be brought to our remembrance when the occasion warrants it. None of us would be sitting in this room tonight if others had not passed on their knowledge to us. It could have come through family, friends, Sunday School, sermons, books or tracts, a wayside pulpit or even in unforeseen casual conversation with a stranger. (Hannah at Tesco checkout). As God told Isaiah, any of His words that are broadcast to others by whatever means will accomplish what He intends it to.

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Hopefully, all these reasons will have whetted your appetite to go exploring in the Bible. This programme is just the beginning of what could become for you a lifelong journey. It will help you to find the significant landmarks that will make sense of what you read in the Bible, so that in your own studies, you will see the relevance of even passages which you may find tedious to read and obscure in meaning. The aim of identifying such landmarks is to demonstrate that all the parts of the Bible are connected to each other, and knowing them, can help us understand where they fit into the divine revelation we have been given. This first step is designed to widen the Biblical horizons so that in your own studies you will begin to get a panoramic view of the spiritual truth that God is using to bring us into a closer relationship with Him. For, as mentioned, knowing and serving God, and being known by Him in a personal relationship that will last into eternity, is the ultimate aim of all Bible study as we live our lives on earth.

In other words, make God's worldview an integral part of our everyday, ordinary lives. Oswald Chambers says that Christians should not have to seek the will of God – they are the will of God. He means that God's word is not something outside of us: it is something that becomes part of the fibre of our being through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. When we have God's word in our hearts and minds, we are experiencing 'Immanuel' - God with us, in a very real and practical way. The hope is that these sessions will make that experience even more of a reality for us all, as we embark on the journey following the signpost into Genesis next week.