

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

### **WEEK 10: LOOKING BACK**

This week and next week we are taking a look back at some important landmarks on Route 66 that have only been mentioned in passing so far. Before we go there, however, I think you would all agree that after what might seem a manic rush to fit in as many landmarks as possible over the last 9 weeks, we need to stop for a breather and review how far we have come. We can only review the timeframe from Abraham because no one can measure the time between the creation of the world and that point in time. From Abraham to Malachi, we find that the landmarks lead us through over 1500 years of God's revelation and His interaction with this world. And, after all the time and effort you have put in in following this route you would be perfectly justified in asking: What have we learned overall from those landmarks? The answer lies in the fact that there is an invisible landmark that appears at every stage throughout the whole of route 66. Because it appears at every stage and every junction of the route, it seemed best to concentrate on a continuous record of the people and events of the various times and leave it to the last 2 weeks, because it emphasises how God is working in and through human history to achieve His purposes.

So, we go back to the beginning where the supremacy, sovereignty and ultra-sacred holiness of God started us on our journey.

**Job 42:1-2 (NIV) Then Job replied to the Lord: 2 "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.**

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

**Ezekiel 3:11 (NIV) Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says,' whether they listen or fail to listen.'**

**Habakkuk 1:13(NIV) Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.**

In many ways today, modern evangelicals have lost sight of the awesomeness of the almighty, glorious Person of God. In the Old Testament we meet the first Person of the Trinity. Here we meet the God of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. Here we have to forget for a time that the New Testament exists, for all of what we find there doesn't appear until between 400 and 500 years after the end of the Old Testament period. In fact, the New Testament writers only knew Him through the writings of the Old Testament. Like them, we need to regain the sight of One ultimate authority in the universe who literally holds the power over the physical, spiritual and eternal life and death of every human being. We need to regain the sight of the God who is so pure that He cannot look on sin and cannot tolerate wrongdoing. We need to regain sight of the fact that His supremacy, sovereignty and holiness means that as Creator of the universe and Controller of human destiny, whatever He decides will happen in the world will happen. And it will happen according to His will in order to further His plans and purposes for our world. Creation showed us this is God's world and, therefore, it is His prerogative to make the choices which determine the who, what, when, where, why and how, life on earth develops as it does. His choice of His agents from the families of Adam

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

and Noah, through the clan of Abraham to the choice of his descendants who became the nation of Israel, was entirely His prerogative.

In our age that questions, rejects and even denies any ultimate authority over human affairs at every level, God's insistence on absolute authority and obedience to His laws appears tyrannical in nature. If we are honest, we would be appalled and extremely frightened to think of any person being granted the kind of power that demanded, expected and enforced absolute obedience to his/her every command. We would probably feel the same way about God if it wasn't for the fact that His supremacy, sovereignty and holiness are directed towards the single aim of saving humanity from the consequences of its own sin. All that happened in the centuries we've looked at was directed towards the goal of saving the human race to live in a restored perfect world where He would be their God and they would be His faithful people. From the beginning of time God has been revealing that to and through His chosen agents starting with Adam, covenants with Noah, Abraham and David, the law through Moses and all prophetic promises in their times and for the future. So, to illustrate we are going back to signposts to junctions that you might have noticed we did not stop at. In fact, there were 9 of them which fall into two separate stages.

The first stage follows in sequence to where we left off last week. It is the five books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Although the subject matter is so wide-ranging and vast, the one thing that all five books have in common is that they are a response to what people of their times had learned and understood about God's sovereign authority, power, personality, plans and purposes. They recognise that regardless of the circumstances which occasioned their writing, God's control was paramount.

Starting with Psalms which is the poetry and song book of the people, we find numerous details of how God interacted with his people at all levels of their existence.

**Psalms 19:1-4 (NIV) The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. 3 They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. 4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.**

**Psalms 24:8-10 (NIV) Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. 10 Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty—he is the King of glory.**

**Psalms 29:3-11 (NIV) The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters. 4 The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. 5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon..... 9 The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" 10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever.**

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

**Psalms 93:1-2 (NIV) The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength; indeed, the world is established, firm and secure. 2 Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.**

Firstly, these examples illustrate the principle of the supremacy and sovereignty of God. They leave us in absolutely no doubt that people knew and understood that God was a glorious, supreme Being whose power created the world. And He did so using just His voice. The Psalmist speaks of power of that voice controlling the mighty waters and breaking and twisting the strongest of the trees that existed in their world. Whole forests can be destroyed by just a word. These are images of unsurpassed and unassailable power that has established and sustains the world. The psalmist goes further because this power is associated with royal majesty. The Lord Almighty is the King who sits on the everlasting throne. You have to wonder that with such knowledge, why did people turn to the worship of false gods and the degrading forms of worship they demanded.

**Psalms 19:7-9 (NIV) The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. 8 The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. 9 The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.**

**Psalms 71:15-16 (NIV) My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long— though I know not how to relate them all. 16 I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign Lord; I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone.**

For, secondly, in comparison, God had given them a perfect law which would keep body, mind and soul in perfect harmony. It was a law that would ensure a right relationship with God and a law that would lead to everlasting salvation. Psalm 119, the longest psalm as we saw in other talks is praise for the Torah. In giving that law, God had given them the opportunity to become as holy as He was. While it may have been true that it could not have been kept perfectly by mere mortals, men like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, Josiah and the prophets aspired to that standard and because they were inwardly committed to it, their relationship with God was secure.

And, thirdly, because that relationship was built on the principle of recognising God's sovereign authority over their lives and all His holy and powerful attributes, they came to know Him as a gracious, loving and caring God to whom they could turn for provision and protection and forgiveness when they had offended Him.

**Psalms 46:1-3 (NIV) God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,**

**Psalms 19:14 (NIV) May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.**

## ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Psalm 23 is, of course the one psalm that encapsulates God's love and care for every aspect of our lives. As you read the psalms, every human emotion is openly expressed before God. It has been claimed that the Psalms express the heart and soul of humanity in the honest outpouring of innermost thoughts and feelings. The psalmists were able to do so because they knew God knew them and understood them and would give the right kind of response when it was most needed. The book of Psalms establishes the principle of a supreme, sovereign and holy God who ardently desires to be involved with His human creation in order to do what is best for it.

Following the signposts into what scholars term the wisdom literature, we find that the common landmark in Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is contemplation of the perplexities of life and the right and wrong ways of living it.

**Job 38:1-7 (NIV) Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: 2 "Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?... 4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. 5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? 6 On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone— 7 while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?.....**

**Job 19:23-27 (NIV) Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, 24 that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! 25 I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. 26 And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; 27 I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!**

There is consensus that Job was the earliest book to be written and, if that is so, it is clear proof that God had already revealed Himself to people of the time. That revelation was enough to encourage and embolden Job to question God's dealings with him. Perfectly naturally, Job just cannot understand why he had to suffer as he did when he had lived up to the light he had been given to serve God in the right way. Job believed his suffering was undeserved and he was right. But Job did not know that. He had to come to terms with the fact that he would never know why God permitted such horrendous suffering in spite of the fact that he had done nothing to offend God. Yet, while he bemoaned his misfortune and suffered mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally on account of it: and at the same time had to combat the false accusations and explanations of his so-called friends, Job never once denied or maligned the character of God. What changed Job from a good man into a wise one was His acceptance that a sovereign and good God knew what He was doing in permitting his suffering. Chapters 38-41 of the book of Job give a catalogue of what God has done and what human beings cannot do. Through this interchange with God he had been given enough insight into God's character and power to know that his suffering would, in the end lead, towards a greater good. Job shows us that we may question God's ways and dealings with us, but, the end of the day, we have to accept God knows what, in the long run is best for us, that will give Him the glory and will further His plans and purposes. Job's words were written down and preserved for posterity. Although his perception of a Redeemer

## ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

was not the same as ours, God revealed to him that eternal life through belief in Him was a reality.

Even though Job shows that good people do suffer, that is no excuse for ignoring God's authority in terms of conduct. By the time of Solomon, who wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, Mosaic law had been passed down through the generations for just over 500 years. It was a well-known fact that obedience to the Law which God had given as a means of salvation, brought blessing: disobedience ended in disaster. Proverbs in many ways spells out the practical details of what that law meant in terms of loving God and your neighbour.

**Proverbs 1:1-7 (NIV) The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: 2 for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; 3 for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just and fair; 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young— 5 let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance— 6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. 7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.**

**Proverbs 8:20 (NIV) I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice,**

**Proverbs 18:5 (NIV) It is not good to be partial to the wicked and so deprive the innocent of justice.**

How one treated a neighbour, in whatever capacity that neighbour existed, was a measure of one's love for God. Following the precepts would also have resulted in social justice and righteousness. The proverbs given in this book are only a fraction of the 3000 or more Solomon is said to have written. They cover every aspect of life including the family, business, legal and government concerns. What the book confirms in terms of God's supreme authority is that He and He alone is the source of true wisdom and the upholder of the practical moral and ethical order.

Having written Proverbs you would have thought Solomon would have been wise enough to take his own advice.

**Ecclesiastes 1:2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”.....**

**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NIV) Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.**

Ecclesiastes shows the consequences of not taking seriously the precept that ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, in the end proved to be the fool who despised the wisdom of God by deliberate disobedience to the instructions in His laws. His self-indulgence of his every whim led him into a meaningless

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

existence. He had everything he wanted, but he didn't have God. If nothing, else, Ecclesiastes proves to us that there is no meaning to life if the principle of God's supremacy, sovereignty and holiness do not govern human time, talents and treasure. Solomon experienced the truth of George Bernano's words: "In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that (does) deceive."

Song of Songs, is, in essence, a love poem, which does not fit into any other category of the Old Testament canon. But it does serve as a commentary on Genesis 3:20-25. Song of Songs emphasises that God's will for the expression of human sexuality was to be in the context of a loving and committed union which meets the approval of God. This again was a principle Solomon chose to ignore when he took wives and concubines from peoples with whom God had explicitly forbidden intermarriage. The landmarks we've already passed, have demonstrated all too clearly the results of that disobedience. Although polygamy was the norm in society in the time of Solomon, had he taken wives only from among his own people, the idyllic relationship depicted in this book might have been the model that would have taken his life on a different path.

Just from these four books, we have seen that the principle of God's supremacy, sovereignty and holiness was understood. The nation of Israel in its wisdom literature clearly acknowledged their status as the people of God and His claims on their lives. By the time of Solomon God had revealed enough of Himself and had clearly spelt out what He expected from them. He had given them a choice to accept His conditions or reject them.

As we have seen throughout our journey, that choice involved four kinds of circumstances. The two negative ones were rebellion and retribution. The two positive ones were repentance and restoration. Reviewing the landmarks so far, we can see how each of these operated in the choices made by individuals and the nation of Israel as a whole. Rebellion in the form of disobedience to the law and worship of other gods brought retribution, the most serious of which was the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians and the captivity and exile of Judah by the Babylonians. When followed by repentance and obedience God restored His favour and blessing and the people benefitted from His intervention to provide for them, protect them and preserve them as the people to whom He had given His covenant promises. Regardless of their failures and unfaithfulness, God's faithfulness to His covenant relationship with the Israelites meant that He would not break covenant, and He showed that through His sovereign power over every other nation that threatened their existence. That brings us to the second set of signposts we did not stop at.

From what the prophets say about the nations surrounding Israel and Judah, we learn that God's sovereignty extends to all peoples and He is just as much the God of their histories as He is of that of His chosen people the Israelites. Also, we see that the four circumstances applying to His chosen people also applied to other nations and empires as well. God had intended the Israelites to be His witnesses among these nations. That they had failed miserably in this task, is shown by the castigation of and pronouncements against the surrounding nations spoken by the prophets. For example, Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesy against Damascus. Ezekiel brings together prophecies against Edom, Moab, Philistia, Tyre and Sidon, Damascus, Ammon and Egypt in chapters 25-32.

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

**Zechariah 2:8** For thus said the LORD of hosts (after his glory sent me) regarding the nations that plundered you: Truly, one who touches you touches the apple of my eye.

**Obadiah 1:3, 10 & 15 (NIV)** The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?.... Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever..... “The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.

Coming in for particular condemnation was Edom, with the prophecy of Obadiah dealing exclusively with it. Edom is condemned also in Amos at the beginning of the period, through Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel to Malachi at the very end of the period. Why is Edom singled out for destruction? Two reasons are given. Obadiah 1:3 talks about the “pride of the heart” of people “who say to yourself ‘Who can bring me to the ground?’” The second reason is in verse 10 “Because of the violence against your brother Jacob you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever.” The people of Edom were descendants of Esau and was thus the sister kingdom of Israel, the descendants of his brother Jacob. Yet Edom throughout the history of the kingdoms was a constant threat to Israel and showed continual hostility towards it, even helping its enemies to invade and taking its share of the spoils. Edom’s persistent hostility to God’s people, was tantamount to an attack on God Himself. Through Obadiah, God foretold that should Edom not repent of these conditions, they would be invaded and that there would be “no survivors from the house of Esau.”(18) Did that prophecy come true? Well, invaders from the Negev, south of Edom are mentioned in verse 19. The Nabateans invaded and Edom was renamed Idumea.

A similar picture emerges with the prophecies of Jonah (c780BC) and Nahum to Nineveh.

**Jonah 1:1-2 & 4:11(NIV)** The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”.... And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

**Nahum 1:1 (NIV)** A prophecy concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite..... **Nahum 1:7-8 (NIV)** The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, 8 but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness.

Nineveh was a great Assyrian city and it too had a history. It is mentioned in Genesis 10:11 as a city founded by Nimrod who also built the tower of Babel, which was a symbol of rebellion against God. By God’s mercy, Nineveh was given a chance to repent of its wickedness as a result of Jonah’s message. Much to Jonah’s disgust, it did, but soon fell back into its old ways. Fifty years later, in 722BC, Israel fell to the Assyrians. Twenty years later Sennacherib attempted to do the same to Judah, which was at that time ruled by

## ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Hezekiah. Although Sennacherib was defeated, Assyria recovered from this setback and became a mighty empire. By the time of Nahum, about thirty years after this event, it was at the height of its wealth and power. But it was also renowned for its cruelty (Nahum 3:19). All the gains from Jonah's time had gone and once more God's judgment was directed towards Nineveh. Failure to repent brought the overwhelming flood of Babylonian invaders who brought the Assyrian empire to end. But, in turn, by the end of the Old Testament period, the Babylonian treatment of the Jews ended in their defeat by the Medes from the south and Persians from the north around 614BC.

**Esther 3:6 (NIV) Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.**

**Esther 8:11 (NIV) The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies.**

**Esther 9:27-28 (NIV) the Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. 28 These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews —nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants.**

And it was under that empire that the book of Esther describes how God preserved His people from the empire-wide genocide planned by Haman.

God is not mentioned in this book, but His direction of events is indisputable. The Amalekites had been Israel's enemy from the time they left Egypt. Would this threat of genocide have arisen if God's command to destroy them had been obeyed? Esther took her life in her hands appearing before the king without an invitation to do so. God used her courage and Mordecai's act of saving Xerxes' life by warning him of an assassination attempt, to preserve the life and property of His people throughout the whole empire. The Jews have not forgotten this Amalekite threat. To this day, the feast of Purim is celebrated by the Jews in March each year to remember how Esther saved the nation from extinction.

The prophecies of Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum and the book of Esther are microcosms of the pattern of rebellion that existed in the other nations and great empires of the Old Testament world. From God's perspective, pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency and hostility and cruelty to God's people were the hallmarks of the nations' rebellions. Action against His people was, in effect, action against God Himself. God's supremacy, sovereignty and holiness, expressed through His exercise of responses to rebellion, retribution, repentance and restoration, applied throughout the whole of the ancient world. And, in the absence of repentance, restoration was impossible. God's judgement on each nation was final. All the prophecies have been fulfilled. None of the people's mentioned exist today as a nation.

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

As we come to the end of this part of our journey along route 66, we hope this journey has opened new vistas of the Old Testament, and if it has, glory should be given to God who has revealed so much of His Almighty character and nature to mere mortals. The glory is His because of His loving concern for His human creation, whom He wants to save for all eternity. His is the glory because He has made the four principles describing our response to Him clear. He has left us in no doubt that those four ageless and timeless principles will govern His perfect and righteous judgement of the activity of humanity.

Although we appear to have reached the end of the Old Testament stages of Route 66, this is not strictly true. The Old Testament carries on the end of the New, and next week we will look at three more background landmarks to see how those aspects take us forward to their influence in the very last book of our Bibles.