

How to use *Route 66*

Welcome to *Route 66*, a journey to discover how the 66 books of the Bible help us to know God and how to live for him. This book is a crash course in enjoying the breadth and depth of the Bible, packed full of practical help.

For many of us, there is a disconnect between the Bible we know we should treasure and the book we struggle to read. On the one hand, we know the Bible is a lamp to our feet, honey on our lips, the sword of the Spirit, and given to equip us for every good work. But sometimes the Bible feels more like a bizarre collection of ancient texts filled with obscure laws, irrelevant genealogies and incomprehensible prophecies with a few nuggets of wisdom, timeless stories and comforting promises mixed in. Using the analogy of a journey, *Route 66* unfolds how different passages of the Bible can help us travel through different passages of our life.

There are three ways you can use this book:

On your own

If your Bible reading needs some inspiration, then this book provides a user-friendly way to get inspired and skilled up to handle the Bible better. Take your time, aiming to read it over eight weeks. There are forty “travel journal” Bible studies for you to put into practice the lessons you are learning along the way, and also an 8-week Bible-reading challenge for the more adventurous.

With your small group

An African proverb says, “If you want to travel fast, travel alone, but if you want to travel far, travel together.” Reading *Route 66* will be a lot more beneficial if you read it with others. With stand-alone small-group questions at the end of each section, this book makes an ideal 8-week small-group series. Group members can be encouraged to keep the travel journal or take up the 8-week Bible-reading challenge between meetings.

With your church

The Bible is God’s word for all his people, and to have the whole church literally on the same page of the Bible can make for exciting and effective discussions and discipleship. *Route 66* contains a variety of ways this can work:

- ⊕ **8 THEMES:** These are the main segments of the Bible based on genres, which can be used as the basis for an 8-week sermon series (service plans available at <http://www.springharvest.org/route66>).
- ⊕ **40 TRAVEL-JOURNAL STUDIES:** These are ideal as daily inspirations helping individuals to practise what has been discussed in each chapter.
- ⊕ **8 SMALL-GROUP STUDIES:** At the end of each week you will find some thought-provoking Bible-study questions for discussion in small groups.
- ⊕ **8-WEEK BIBLE-READING CHALLENGE:** At the end of the book is a suggested plan for reading through the whole of the Bible in eight weeks.

Introduction: **the journey**

I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.

Oscar Wilde¹

I agree. Train journeys are the ideal place for reading books. Reading redeems the long hours in a waiting-room and generates a force-field of privacy in a crowded carriage. But although Oscar Wilde's diary contained some riveting material, my own diary is probably one of the most drab and dreary books on my shelf. Give me a good novel any day, or anything off the *Times* bestseller list. A magazine or a newspaper will do otherwise, and failing that, there is always my Bible lurking somewhere at the bottom of my bag. The Bible is often so low down on my list of favourite literary texts, it may as well be propping up my bookshelf along with my Russian-language copy of *War and Peace* and last year's telephone directory.

I am grateful for the occasional long train journey to remind me that reading the Bible can be relaxing, refreshing, even rewarding. Imagine that the book we open simply for entertainment or edification or education actually changes our direction and destination. Imagine that instead of travelling with the book, we start travelling by the book. Here are three illustrations to help us to grasp these distinctions.

Transportation or transformation?

My train journey to work with my fellow commuters is an inconvenience to be endured. Our heads and hands are buried in our newspapers and our ears are jammed by headphones in an attempt to trick our senses into believing we are anywhere else but on the 7.03 into Marylebone. The second part of my commute used to be on the suffocating, sweaty, stuffy London underground, but since I bought a bike this part of my journey has become an adventure, although unfortunately no less sweaty! My commute by bike is about transformation as well as transportation. I can now feel calf muscles where there once was only amorphous fat. I now understand the city not as a knotted maze of roads, but more like a familiar friend. As we travel through the Bible together, we will see that reading it is not a chore to be endured but an opportunity to be transformed. The aim of *Route 66* is not just to teach you how to navigate your way around the Bible, but how to navigate life with the Bible, allowing God's word to change our faith and our lives and our character en route.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act 2.

Information or translation?

Some journeys are about gaining information, like the open-top bus tour of Belfast I went on in the rain to fill a spare hour between meetings. I now know all sorts of information about that beautiful city that may possibly come in handy in a pub quiz but is otherwise surplus to the requirements of daily life. It was a very different city tour to one I had been on several years earlier in Tirana, the capital city of Albania, with a friendly bilingual tour-guide. Not only did I acquire information about the historical landmarks, I discovered where to buy a loaf of bread, how to phone home, and what to say when I needed to access my bank account. This was to be vital knowledge for managing everyday life for the following three years as my wife and I worked there. As we become more familiar with the contours of the Bible, we are not just collecting lots of theological data about the literary landmarks to store in the recesses of our minds. The aim of *Route 66* is to give us skills to help us to translate the Bible, not literally from Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, but practically into the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

Obligation or invitation?

My journey to visit 3 Wellington Road, where a frail and elderly lady lived, was always a drag. My mum, usually on some mission to bring charity and culinary pleasure, had to physically unplug me from my games console and usher me out of the door. I made those walks a lot of hard work. My feet were moving, but my head was down and my heart was far, far away; physically I was present, but I was emotionally absent.

My one and only journey to visit 10 Downing Street was not like that. My heart was beating fast and there was a spring in my step as I happily abandoned everything and anything else I was doing that afternoon. Our journey with the Bible is less about obligation and more about invitation. The aim of *Route 66* is to break away from seeing the Bible as a book we are obliged to study, and to see it more as an invitation into the company of the King of Kings.

I aced my driving theory test. By memorizing the Highway Code, I could tell you the precise stopping distance of a car travelling at 60 mph in the wet and I could identify any traffic sign that you could throw at me, whether low bridges, duck crossings, or bio-hazards. I walked out of that office with my head and my certificate held high and then begrudgingly got into the passenger seat of the car. Despite passing the theory exam, I was still totally incapable of getting a car to go from A to B. Three months later, I succeeded in providing my driving-test examiner with several near-death experiences in a 25-minute test of faith. I am not sure whether it was the stray piece of scaffolding in a skip which barely missed his head

as I took a corner, or the whiplash he got from my emergency stop, or simply the sheer look of panic on the faces of passers-by that led him to fail me.

There is a huge difference between theory and practice, not only regarding learning to drive, but also when reading the Bible. Knowing the theory of how to navigate the Bible is a very different set of skills to knowing how to navigate life with the Bible.

Unfortunately for many of us, theoretical knowledge is all we have. Like a geography lecturer at a university who can describe the way that the glaciers, rock formations and wind-speed patterns affect the north face of Everest, but who is totally incapable of making an assault on the mountain, we are often full of information that does not translate into action.

But theoretical knowledge is important. The basic information I learned in my driving theory test is invaluable to me every time I drive a car. In the same way, it is vital to grasp some theoretical knowledge if we are going to allow our life journeys to be shaped by the Bible. *Route 66* contains plenty of theory, gathered together from the best Bible scholars around, but let's not be satisfied with that – *Route 66* also aims to inspire us to take it to the next level.

When we learn to drive, there is no substitute for simply getting behind the wheel, crunching the gears into place, feeling, hearing or even smelling the biting-point of a clutch, and sensing the responsibility of steering a potential killing machine through crowded town streets. Handling the Bible is no different. The good book is not going to do us any good unless we are willing to move from theory to practice. Whether we are reading the Bible by ourselves for the first time, or passing on a Bible truth to somebody else for the umpteenth time, it is as the rubber hits the road that we experience the fact that the Bible is far more than just a book.

When I finally passed my driving test, I got into the car, taking full responsibility for my life and the lives of hundreds of other road-users and future passengers. I said goodbye to my instructor, never seeing or hearing from him again. I was officially a safe driver, but the question remained then as now – how will I drive today? Theoretical knowledge and good habits together are not quite sufficient. We need to get our attitude in gear too.

Richard Briggs, in his book *Reading the Bible Wisely*, poses this riddle: *Who are you?*

*You believe that
... the Scriptures are the word of God
... they apply to all of life
... it is important to interpret them properly
... God still speaks through his Scriptures today
... God's word is for everyone, even those who do not realize it.²*

In Jesus' day the Pharisees would have affirmed all of these statements. As religious leaders they had the same view of the Bible as many of us, a sound doctrine of Scripture, excellent background information and rigorous habits for Bible reading and memorization. Yet when the Bible's promised Messiah, Jesus Christ himself, stood physically in front of them, they failed to recognize him. I would like to suggest a four-point check of virtues that we should monitor, pursue and develop³ to help us beware of the blindness of the Pharisees.

Open to listen?

My SatNav has transformed my confidence, efficiency and stress levels while driving. However, I always turn the volume off. I don't mind being shown the right way to go, but being given instructions by the SatNav lady makes me feel like a naughty or stupid schoolboy! And when I get told off for pulling into the services for fuel, or making a detour to drop a DVD back, I could easily strangle that annoying voice that barks over and over, "Turn around where possible." I wonder if we have the same attitude to the Bible. We may be happy to turn to the Bible when we feel lost or when we want comfort or reassurance, but we resist the voice of the Holy Spirit, particularly when we think we know better or don't want to change course. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their obstinate refusal to listen and saved the heartbeat of his teaching for those who had ears to hear.⁴

Open to learn?

The Pharisees often approached Jesus with a question. But mostly it was not because they were looking to catch something of Jesus' wisdom or passion, but because they were trying to catch Jesus out. The Pharisees came so preloaded with theological convictions that when God's Son spoke to them, there was no room in their minds or hearts for what he had to say. Sometimes we need to be prepared not only to listen, but also to learn and relearn. I have had to do this

² Briggs, R., 2003, *Reading the Bible Wisely*, SPCK.

³ Kevin Vanhoozer lists honesty, openness, attention and obedience as the interpretive virtues that are needed to respect the givenness of the text of Scripture. See Vanhoozer, K., 1998, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, IVP, p. 377, and also Briggs, R. S., 2010, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*, SPCK.

⁴ Jesus uses this phrase often, normally connected with a parable. Mark 4:9, 23. "The efficacy of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom depends on faithful hearing." Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D. & Reid, D. G., 2000, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (electronic ed.), p. 224, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

with mathematics recently. I am more than happy to listen to my son talk about his maths homework, but in order to understand and help him, I need to relearn the subject the way he has learned it. It is so totally different from the way I was taught that I may as well learn to write with my left hand while I am at it! The humility I need to allow my eight-year-old to teach me a whole new world of “chunking” and “sharing” is nothing compared to the humility we need to accept that God’s word gives us a whole upside-down view of how we should live our lives.

Open to change?

Imagine driving along the inside lane of the motorway, gradually gaining on a slow caravan in front. You check your mirrors, and spot a thirty-ton shiny red truck hurtling down the middle lane. Nobody in their right mind would promptly forget that thirty-ton shiny red truck and pull out anyway. The whole point of spotting the oncoming hazard is to take appropriate action. James applies this mirror principle to reading the Bible, challenging us to be committed not just to observing the information, but to applying and obeying the instruction.⁵ Jesus told countless parables to show the Pharisees the error of their ways, but their refusal to change led them so far away from God that they executed his Son. The only person who really equips us to hear and apply the word of God is the Spirit of God. As David Jackman puts it: “There is a special appropriateness in this, for it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the Word and it is still his great tool in the work of bringing people to Christ and building them up in the faith.”⁶ It is only as we allow the Holy Spirit to do his work that we will be open to the word of God to change us.

Open to critique?

Jesus says things to the Pharisees I would love to say to some Christians I know! He calls them whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers, hypocrites and more. But my temptation betrays just how like the Pharisees I am, falling into the same trap of being willing to criticize others and unwilling to consider my own flaws and failings. Jesus puts it much more creatively: “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”⁷ Or elsewhere: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”⁸ We cannot fault-find or name and shame others in our churches, because Jesus tells us that we need to be willing to apply the Bible’s teaching to ourselves first. Rather than using the Bible as a weapon to attack others, do we have the softness of heart that allows God to lovingly expose our own shortcomings?

Recently I drove my car over my laptop. Not deliberately, I hasten to add. I sadly

⁵ James 1:21–23.

⁶ Jackman, D., 2006, *Spirit of Truth: Unlocking the Bible’s Teaching on the Holy Spirit*, Proclamation Trust Media, p. 9.

⁷ Matthew 23:24–26.

⁸ Matthew 7:3.

mistook my suitcase for a snowdrift and reversed over it. Now there are certain advantages in flattening things – it makes packing a lot easier as less space is taken up, it is kinder on the environment as less energy is used, and it reminds us of the temporary nature of material possessions. But flattening can also mean that the purpose, functionality and sheer beauty of things get utterly and fatally destroyed.

Often, to make the Bible easier to grasp, we flatten it. Some sermons are like spiritual steamrollers ignoring the nuance, substance or background of the text, and forcing it into a twenty-minute, three-point, monotonous, bullet-point structure. Unfortunately it is not only preachers who handle the Bible this way. When we read the Bible for ourselves, we can easily approach the different books with the same expectations. This is the reason why many of us attempt to read the Bible through from cover to cover and give up when we move from the storytelling style of Genesis and Exodus to the lists in Leviticus. This is why many of us stick to the familiarity of the gospels and epistles and don't venture much into the foreign territory of the rest of the Bible. But flattening the Bible like this leaves us feeling flat too, which can be fatal for our spiritual lives.

A great deal of our Christian literature is an attempt to flatten the Bible into another type of book.

But God did not send us a spiritual repair manual, full of step-by-step practical advice for maintaining and repairing our spiritual lives.

God did not send us a bumper sticker with pithy quotations to help us smile or regain perspective.

God did not send us a full service history with exact specifications of how previous owners had lived up to the responsibility of being a Christian.

God did not send us the Highway Code with all theological terms defined and rules for salvation clearly stated to keep us on the right side of the law.

God did not send us an MOT certificate declaring who was roadworthy of heaven.

The Bible is not a theological textbook, a small book of calm, a list of rules and regulations, a get-out-of-hell-free card or a fast-paced page-turner ideally adaptable for the big screen. The Bible is God's voice in our hands – he chose to speak to us in a book that is diverse in style, broad in context, grounded in history, deep in theology, true to life and perfect for growing faith whoever and wherever we are.

The variety of the Bible mirrors the variety and breadth of human experience – our personalities, our moods, our decisions, our learning preferences, our life experiences, our flaws, our gifts, our struggles, our needs. If we could learn how to better appreciate the diversity, details and depths of the Bible, we would be better equipped to navigate through the complexities of the journey of faith in today's world.

God, in his wisdom, knew that we needed every word of every page of every book of the Bible, and God knew we needed the variety of styles (which we will call genres) that we are going to look at more closely in the rest of this book:

1. Narrative
2. Law
3. Psalms
4. Wisdom
5. Prophetic
6. Gospels
7. Epistles
8. Apocalyptic

Genres as terrains

Scholars sometimes devote lifetimes of study and endless books to just one verse, chapter or letter of the Bible, so attempting to open up the whole of the Bible in just eight sections may seem daunting. In order to cover the key bases, we are not going to provide in-depth study of each book of the Bible, or get into the fine details of the historical, theological and cultural controversies. Rather, *Route 66* aims to be a “crash course” in driving through the different terrains of Scripture, that will launch you into discovering more of the Bible for yourself.

The historic US highway Route 66 is unique because of its variety of terrain. From cosmopolitan cities to mysterious ghost-towns, from colourful, scenic mountains to sandy, flat plains and deserts, it is precisely the variety of the landscape that attracts people to drive its length for sheer pleasure as well as out of necessity.

Scripture is similarly diverse, from the panoramic pronouncement of the origins of the universe to the painstaking details of the template for the temple; from the comic relief of the pantomime that is the book of Esther to the agonizing emotional rollercoaster of Psalms; from Jeremiah’s desert experience to Jesus’ despair in the garden of Gethsemane to John’s vision of the celestial city.

This book cannot possibly be an exhaustive list either of biblical or individual terrains.⁹ Even the most meticulous driving preparation classes do not cover every possible driving scenario. Rather, the instructors train learner drivers to handle a number of different types of driving conditions so that they build up a skill set that they can then apply in the wide spectrum of real-world driving situations.

When Chesley Sullenberger was forced to crash land a jet plane carrying 155 passengers into the Hudson River in February 2009, he managed to do so safely not

⁹ For more detailed analysis see Greidanus, S., 1988, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: interpreting and preaching Biblical literature*, Eerdmans; Fee, G. & Stuart, D., 2003, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, Zondervan; Duvall, J. & Hays, J. D., 2005, *Grasping God’s Word*, Zondervan; Osborne, G. R., 1991, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A comprehensive introduction to Biblical interpretation*, IVP.

because he had been trained for that precise eventuality, but because he was able to extrapolate common sense from his thorough training in all sorts of standard and emergency conditions.¹⁰ As we engage with the different genres to develop Bible-reading and life-navigating skills, we should see this as a starting point that can then be useful in all sorts of other contexts.

Genres as gears

Secondly, in everyday life we are often subconsciously aware of different genres of writing, and we instinctively adapt our reading style. We do not attempt to read the telephone directory from cover to cover, or sing the contents of a Chinese takeaway menu, or memorize the small print of an insurance certificate. Learning to discover the right reading style for each genre can be likened to finding the right gear for the terrain we are crossing. Fifth gear may be better than first gear on a motorway, but a low gear is far more useful on a hazardous route. So for some parts of Scripture we may feel like we are cruising, while in others it is more of an uphill struggle, a stop-start city route, or a slow crawl. Nevertheless, every gear or genre is given to us to be useful at some point.

Genres as perspectives

Finally, although the gears are vital, it would be a scary experience to travel with someone who drives with their eyes glued to the gear-stick. An experienced driver will not even look down but instinctively change to the right gear while focusing on where they are going. It would be a similarly fatal mistake to focus so much on the genres that we miss the whole point of Scripture – which is to draw us into a transforming relationship with the living God. To keep their eyes on where they are going, drivers have a variety of perspectives – the windscreen, side windows, rear-view mirror, dashboard display, SatNav screen – all of which are used in different and complementary ways to enable them to drive wisely. In the same way, the Scriptures provide us with windows on God's character, and a variety of different perspectives that help us not only build a composite picture of who God is, but also a composite way of thinking and travelling through life with God.

Looking back, I cannot tell you exactly what I did on any one of my driving lessons. I do remember having to recover my magnetic L plates off the side of a busy country road, and I will never forget that dreaded five-way roundabout I could never join, much to the annoyance of the growing queue of irate drivers behind me. But even though I don't remember how I learned to master three-point turns, hill starts or busy roundabouts, I do know that before my lessons I was not able to drive, and now I can. I know that once I struggled and sweated at each manoeuvre

¹⁰ Wright, N. T., 2010, *Virtue Reborn*, SPCK, p. 7.

and junction, but now general road-sense is second nature. As we travel through this book, many of the tips and habits may feel clumsy at first, but as we persevere and practise and progress, we will develop good instincts for navigating life with the Bible.

The Bible is more than just a book. It is more than just a library. It is more than the number-one bestseller of all time. It is more than a priceless ancient literary artefact. It is more than a useful guide to life. It is more than a precious collection of love-letters. It is more than a treasure-trove of truth. God created the whole vast universe with just a dozen words, and then put 800,000 more words into our hands.

Each word was chosen for a reason. This is why reading the Bible and navigating life have to go hand in hand. As we look more closely at the beauty of the poetry, the precision of the laws, the passion of the prophets and much more, it is my prayer that our all-powerful God would reveal himself to us and work powerfully in us, so that we can live to please him in every way.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.¹¹

11 2 Timothy 3:14–17.

Day 1: The ride of our lives

Luke is funny. He is clever. He is 145 cm tall and has brown eyes.

What is your mental image of Luke from that description? Are you imagining a small clown turning cartwheels? Are you thinking geeky and peculiar? Awkward and studious? Scheming and tricking? I'm afraid all of these are way off mark. Describing anyone in terms of a few physical features and personality traits falls seriously short. So let me introduce you to my son Luke another way – with a story.

Yesterday Luke brought his schoolwork home. When we asked why he hadn't completed the work at school, he explained crossly that he had been waiting in the queue to get the materials from the teacher when he saw one of his friends struggling. He went over to help him out and rejoined the queue. Just as he was almost at the front he spotted a girl crying, so he went over to give her a hand and by the time he rejoined the queue again, she was smiling. By the end of the lesson he had helped half the class in one way or another, but had hardly started his project. When his teacher saw his work, she told him off for "doing nothing" and gave him a warning.

Just from this one short story, we gain an insight into the way Luke relates to others, his selflessness, and his sense of justice. We read "clever" as mentally resourceful, and "funny" as good at making other people smile. But more than just picturing him, you are probably beginning to relate to Luke. You may even have begun to think about what you would do in his shoes or what you would say to him if you were his teacher, his friend or his parent.

Statements like "Luke is 145 cm tall" are important. But they are merely the bones of a skeleton when it comes to getting to know somebody. A story fleshes out the description, giving us a clearer picture of the person and offering us the possibility of intimacy and relationship. When God introduces himself to us in the beginning of the Bible, he does so through story after story after story. This has a number of effects:

1. Stories reveal God's character¹²

Not just in terms of abstract concepts that could be misconstrued, but also in terms of concrete examples. For the most part the story of the Bible is a retelling of how God has connected characters, communities, continents and the cosmos itself in his great big story for all of creation, making the character of the invisible God visible to us.

¹² See Newbiggin, L., 1989, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, p. 99.

2. Stories draw us into the story

Stories abduct our emotions, stealing them away into the drama as we recognize the dilemmas and empathize with the characters.¹³ By experiencing the stories God has given us in this way, our imagination, our ambition and our lives are drawn into the captivating narrative of the Bible.

3. Stories draw us into relationship

As we see God's character in action, we get to know different aspects of his personality and foundations for a relationship are built as we share his hopes and heartaches.

4. Stories make us who we are

"In order to make sense of our lives and to make our most important decisions, we depend on some story."¹⁴ In a world of competing stories the Bible tells us true stories about the way things really happened so that we can be caught up into God's ultimate story of the grand sweep of history. Sometimes we zoom in and see the fine detail – like in the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers. Other times we zoom out to see the genealogies that summarize generations of stories where God was faithful to his people. It has been said that history is His Story, but it is also our story, as we too belong somewhere in the sweep of history described between Genesis 1 and Revelation 21.

5. Stories change our lives

One sweltering summer's day my wife and I heard a story about a beautiful newborn baby girl who had no home to go to, as her birth mother was unable to care for her. She was lying in the hospital that hot afternoon, oblivious to the uncertainties of her future as social workers phoned around possible placements. We were newly approved foster carers. On hearing this story we faced a choice. Our decision to get involved in the story of this little girl had life-changing consequences as we first fostered her, then adopted her, loving her as our own daughter. Reading the stories of the Old Testament comes with a health warning: the more we get to know God, and the more we get drawn into the Bible story, the harder it will be to ignore the invitation to join the ride of our lives in God's big plan for the universe.

¹³ See Sweet, L., McLaren, B. & Hasselmayer, J., 2003, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emergent Church*, Zondervan, pp. 31–33.

¹⁴ See Bartholomew, C. & Goheen, M., 2006, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our place in the biblical story*, SPCK, p. 1.

