

Read it Backwards

The end before the beginning is the only way to grasp it:

The Christian story of salvation is a mystery to most people, and this includes not only those who reject religion, but many who are Christian, too. The only record we have of it is the Bible, but if you read the Bible like a book, starting at the beginning, it makes little sense as it progresses. To understand the beginning we have to know the end first. The story is easier to understand if it is, so to speak, read backwards.

If we start at the beginning, with no knowledge of the end, it seems to tell of a God who does what he likes, apparently not caring much about how it affects people. He wiped everybody out at one point, for instance, leaving only one family left, and then as they got on their feet after the disaster which destroyed them, he deliberately confused their language and put civilization back generations. Later, he selected one man to befriend, made spectacular promises to him to be realized through his son, and then told the man to kill that very same son in a sacrifice! Later still he selected one small nation, blessed them above all other people, killed their enemies and gave them their enemies' land, but what on earth was that all about? None of it makes much sense, and God seems so illogical, unfair, and even cruel - if that's the whole story; but it isn't.

If we start at the other end of the Bible we'll find that all this was leading to something. God's early dealings with mankind and the nation of Israel were simply a precursor and preparation for a result so spectacular that even many who claim to be Christian don't believe it! But it's not until we know the end that the means of reaching that end can make any sense.

Our view of events is limited to the time-span in which we each live. What happens to us now could well be vital in dictating the future, but limited in view as we are, we have no knowledge of the effect that these present events may have on what happens next.

Jesus' disciples had just this problem too, and their experience serves to illustrate the point. They were faced with this unique human being who claimed he was the Son of God. He performed miracles and claimed that all his followers would be given the gift of eternal life with him in his heavenly kingdom. He even forgave sins, which only God could do. He also claimed to be one with God, and that he'd send the Spirit of God to dwell with the disciples to enable them to do even greater works than he'd done. The future looked great but then, all of a sudden, he was accused of blasphemy, tried, condemned, crucified and buried!

Within their limited view and time-span, it was past all reasoning. How could the Son of God be killed? All they'd believed in and hoped for had come to an abrupt and inexplicable end. They'd been faced by angry accusers brandishing swords, and in fear and confusion most of the disciples ran away. When it was all over and Jesus was dead, they reverted back to their old lives very quickly, back to the ordinary work of fishing, and back to something more reasonable. But that didn't last long either, because, apparently, a deranged woman was claiming she'd seen Jesus alive, that his tomb was empty and the disciples should go and meet with him in Galilee! A couple of them ran to the tomb and found it empty just as she had said, but they still failed to understand.

It was impossible to explain. It was totally mystifying. But they didn't know the end of the story yet.

That evening Jesus then comes to them in person and demonstrates he's alive by eating food and showing them the wounds from the crucifixion. Over the next few weeks he gradually opens up their understanding of the scriptures as he'd already done for the two men on the road to Emmaus, and suddenly the whole story drops into place! They could see that Scripture had previously told of these events, in perfect detail, and they could see what the events signified, too. It was nothing less than the salvation of the human race!

Many of the obscure things Jesus had said to them in the past came to mind with blinding clarity. The Holy Spirit was indeed sent to empower them and Peter preached a message which brought 3000 people to repentance in one day!

If only they had known all this before! Then they wouldn't have agonized and wrestled with the confusing and apparently meaningless words of Jesus like "eating his flesh and drinking his blood." But how could they have known what he meant when their view of him was limited to the present?

We can know today what he meant, though, thanks to these disciples who explained it to us. They've given us the end of the story. We can now make sense of God's dealings with mankind from the very beginning, through the life of Israel and Jesus, and see how it leads inevitably to the most spectacular conclusion. We can see how the story of Abraham and his son Isaac tells of God's making a covenant of salvation to be enacted later when Jesus Christ came. And we can see how God's relationship with Israel set the stage for the formation of the Church and Christianity. To us it all makes sense, thanks to those who understood, explained and lived the purpose of all these events for real.

At one point it didn't make sense to them either, though, just like our world today doesn't make much sense to us, perhaps - and especially as God seems just as uncaring about what happens to our world as he was toward the world of Noah's time. He lets terrorism, greed, self-interest, corruption and destruction take their grim toll today, but take heart, we know the end of the story! God is going to wipe this world out and re-make it. He's going to roll up the present firmament like a scroll and make all things new. There'll be no more war, tears, pain, corruption, decay or hurt. All things will be in unity with God and at peace. That's the end of the story. See what I mean about reading it backwards? It may seem awful right now, but it's all for a grand purpose in the end. In God's book, the end really does justify the means!

Meanwhile, the story includes you and me. It involves our world and our lives right now. It's not only about the past and a spectacular future, it's also about now. You, along with me, are already involved because God is working with all of humanity, not just particular people. We may not know what the immediate future holds, but regardless of our time-limited view, the end of the story is certain.

It's as certain as the empty tomb which so shocked and mystified Jesus' disciples. But for them the best was yet to come, and so it is for us.