

THE FIRST AND THE LAST

ISAIAH 44:6-8

“Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: ‘I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.

And who can proclaim as I do? Then let him declare it and set it in order for Me, since I appointed the ancient people. And the things that are coming and shall come, let them show these to them. Do not fear, nor be afraid; have I not told you from that time, and declared it?

You are My witnesses. Is there a God besides Me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

How far back in your life can you remember?

I’ve thought about this... I can picture looking from my playpen, watching the Major League Baseball Game Of The Week, listening to Dizzy Dean and PeeWee Reese.

That was in the early 1960s.

But my lifespan only takes me back 56 years. Perhaps some of you can think back further... maybe you voted for Eisenhower, or have a few memories of World War 2.

But what if you could think back 256 years?

Imagine, living in the American colonies while people debated and prepared for a revolution from Britain?

How about 1000 years ago?... The Chinese first used gunpowder in battle - the Mayan civilization began its collapse -

the Vikings conquered northern France. *Can you imagine what life was like in eras and places past?*

Think back still further, 3000 years, and watch King David lead Israel's troops into battle with the Philistines.

Or go further back, the tower of Babel - or the flood of Noah's day - or Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden...

(Close eyes) *"Oh, Adam, please don't bite that apple, all wives will start going to the mall to buy clothes!"*

Can you stretch your senses beyond Adam and Eve in the Garden, to the dawning of time? To the first infusion of energy into *empty space and lifeless matter.*

When God spoke, *"Let there be light!" And there was.*

In Genesis 1:1 the Bible begins, but God didn't. We're told, *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."* Close your eyes and try to imagine a few seconds before that opening scene, *what do you see?*

I'll tell you Who was there... *Jesus was the First.*

And how far into the future can you imagine?

If the Lord tarries how many technological marvels await us? How will demographics and politics change us? What'll happen to America? Will it cost us to follow Christ? What kind of world will our children inherit?

As Christians we're looking for Jesus. He's promised to return for us. No man knows the day or hour, but we hope it's soon... After Jesus comes, dark days await. Severe, earth-shaking judgments rain down on Earth.

The Bible then predicts a coming Kingdom. God's promise to David will finally be fulfilled. His descendant, Jesus the Messiah, reigns forever. Redemption at last!

We can think ahead a hundred years - our knees start knocking at those seven years of tribulation - Jesus will reign a thousand years... *but can you see still further?*

Can you envision when time melts into eternity - after all decisions have been made - all destinies decided?

Time will be peeled back, and God's eternal state will be unveiled. The final frame in the Bible's prophetic picture is what it calls "a new heaven and a new earth."

And guess who'll be its king?... *Jesus is the Last.*

So put it together, *Jesus is the First and He is the Last.* Before time began He was. After time expires He'll be.

The Hebrew Prophet Micah wrote around 740 BC, and Micah saw the Baby of Bethlehem in this very light...

He starts by predicting Messiah's birthplace. In 5:2 of his prophecy, he writes, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting..." Of the numerous villages that dotted the Judean countryside, God picked Bethlehem, tiny and obscure. It would be the birthplace for His chosen King.

Jesus was born off the beaten path - in a humble spot.

Yet what's most revealing about Micah's prophecy is that Bethlehem was not the Babe's beginning. He writes, "whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting."

This word "everlasting" means, "from eternity on." Some folks translate it, "beyond the vanishing point."

As we tried to do earlier, the idea is to go in your mind either backward or forwards as far as you can - 5000 years, 5 billion, 50 trillion-quintillion years - *there's Jesus.*

As Psalm 90:2 puts it, "Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God." The Eternal God and Baby of Bethlehem are one in the same. The Ancient of Days became a Child of Time. Jesus is God - *the first and last.*

Which leads us to our text this morning...

Isaiah 44 was written to a people who were trying to be faithful to their God while swimming in a sea of polytheism and idolatry. And Isaiah throws them a lifeline... Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, is the one, true God. He tells them, "*Besides Me there is no God.*"

There is no god before Him. There is no god after Him. The God of Israel is the one and only true God!

He declares, "*I am the First and I am the Last.*"

Yet Isaiah 44:6 actually poses a quandary... If you're the first - then there's only one of you. By definition, if there are two firsts - then one of the firsts isn't first... And if you're last, you're the only one who can be last. If you have two lasts, then neither of the lasts is really last...

Yet Isaiah 44 insists there are *two first and two lasts...*

We read in verse 6, “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, **and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:** ‘I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.’”

“*The Lord, the King of Israel*” and “*his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts*” are both given the title “*Lord.*” Both Lords speak in unison, and claim to be exclusively divine. They say, “*Besides Me there is no God.*” Both occupy the universal first position, and the universal last position.

Like I say, Isaiah 44:6 contains a real dilemma!

But remember, tucked away in the prophecy of Isaiah are portraits of Jesus. If we dig deep we can mine some priceless treasures. And here is a portrait we might not have recognized if it weren't for the New Testament.

Four times in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus, our Lord is referred to by the same terminology we find in Isaiah 44. He's called “**the First and the Last.**”

Here the NT solves the OT riddle... The Bible does teach there is *only One first* and *only One last*, but it insists that the One consists of Two. *Israel's God* is the *Redeemer of the Church*. Jesus and Yahweh are One.

This coming October we'll be touring in the footsteps of Paul and John, and one of our destinations will be the Mediterranean isle of Patmos. John had been sentenced by the Emperor to hard labor on this oversized rock.

He tells us in Revelation 1, that on the Lord's Day, he heard a voice behind him - like a trumpet - saying, “**I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last...**”

He turned around, and saw, “**One like the Son of Man**” clothed in all His glory. He wore a golden band and was as white as snow. There was fire in His eyes - stars in His hand - a sword in His mouth. He shined like the sun.

John tells us, “**When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead.**” He was totally overwhelmed by the Lord’s glory.

John continues, “**But He laid His right hand on me...**”

And guess what He said? ‘Do not be afraid: I am the First and the Last.’ That name was meant to comfort.

Remember, John had not seen His Lord, His Jesus, for half-a-century, not since He had ascended to heaven.

During his time with Jesus, John had learned so much. The love of Jesus had won his heart. The humility, and service, and sacrifice showed John a better way.

But believers were now suffering... the Church had been waiting... what’s happened to Jesus? Has His time away caused His glory to fade?... His purposes to fail?

The Revelation of Jesus answers these questions with a resounding “**no!**” Jesus is **the first** and **the last** - and no matter how long a wait there is *in between* - nothing about Jesus diminishes. He is the only faithful God!

What Jesus starts He finishes. The kingdom He begins in our hearts, He will establish on Earth. All the world will bow before Him. Jesus is **the first and the last**.

This name assured John. It comforted Him. Nothing He’s trusted in has failed. Jesus is as sovereign now, in heaven, as He was on

the Galilee the day He calmed the sea. He is **the first, the originator** - but He is also **the last, the culminater**. All He promises He'll bring to pass.

And you too can rest in the promises of Jesus.

Every promise involves a wait. Promises are like seeds. Sown in one season, they're reaped in another.

The giving and the receiving of a promise is always separated by an *in-between-time, an in-the-meantime*.

This is where you insert trust. Believe in this name, *“the first and the last!”* Don't just bet on Jesus before the race, cheer for Him at the finish line. Count on Him to be true to His Word. Wait for His promise. **All He asks of us is faith, but faith is what He asks.** He laid His hand on John to give him assurance. He'll lay His hand on us.

The next time this name appears is in Revelation 2:8.

Jesus is addressing the persecuted church of Smyrna, when He introduces Himself, *“these things says the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life...”*

Again, He's speaking to believers threatened by prison, by poverty, by suffering, even by death - *yet He's already conquered the worst that could happen to them.* He's the One *“who was dead and came to life.”*

Jesus assures their trembling hearts. He was there when they *first* said **“yes”** to follow Him. He'll be there when they take their *last* breath. He's *their first and last*.

And when your world is coming unhinged...

When everything around you is in turmoil...

When you question the past and fear for the future...

Remember Jesus is **first** in line to help you. And He'll be **last** by your side when everyone else forsakes you.

He's *your first and your last*. Jesus has already conquered the very worst that will ever happen to you.

And the last time this name is mentioned in the Revelation is in its final chapter. Realize, this is one of the last portrait of Himself Jesus leaves to His Church...

These are words He wants impressed upon us.

Here's how Jesus is to be thought of, *"I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, **the First and the Last.**"*

Alpha was the first letter in the Greek *alpha*-bet, and *Omega* was the last. It's like us saying, *"He's the A to Z."*

The implication is that Jesus is not only the beginning and the end, *but He is also everything in between.*

All that we do as believers, as Christians, should be done with Jesus in mind!... *Is he your first thought? How would Jesus have done a thing? What would be His concern? **Let's filter everything through His story...***

And our final thought should be Jesus! *What's the end result? Is He my ultimate aim? **Let's do it for His glory...***

Here's my challenge for this first Sunday in a new year. In everything we do, let's **start with His story**, let's **shoot for His glory!** Let Jesus be *your first and last*.

It reminds me of a middle-age woman with an incurable disease. She checked into the hospital for tests. Her doc told her that her days were numbered.

One night she had a vision - a visit from her guardian angel. He told her that she would live 30 more years.

She was so excited. The woman thought, **"Well if I'm going to live for three more decades I should do so in style."** So before she left the hospital, she ordered a face lift, some liposuction, even a tummy-tuck...

Well, when the woman's stay in the hospital was over she was walking out to her car, when suddenly, a truck blindsided her. Sadly, the woman died instantly.

When she got to heaven, she saw her guardian angel. She was so mad, **"You told me I'd live 30 more years!"** He replied, **"Yea, but I didn't recognize you!"**

The gal changed so much her angel didn't realize it was her. And I'm afraid there're Christians who have the same problem with Jesus... He's no longer *the baby in the manger - the Child worshipped by the wise men - the boy in the Temple* - He's all grown up now!

Today, Jesus strides across time. One foot is planted firmly in the beginning... One foot dominates the end of all things... *And He oversees everything in between.*

In this morning's text, Isaiah says *the King of Israel and His Redeemer* likes to reveal Himself by telling the end from the beginning. Note verse 7, **“who can proclaim as I do?... the things that are coming and shall come...”**

The God who is **“the first and the last,”** proves He is, by predicting future events. Divine prophecy is evidence of God's supremacy and sovereignty over all things.

Recently, *“Bing”* the internet search engine released its predictions for 2015. Bing can track trends, and from them make calculations about the future. For example...

The new fashion style will be the turtleneck... Wow, I hope not! You won't see me choking in a turtleneck...

Americans will eat more Hummus and Middle Eastern food... Small town travel will eclipse vacations to the big cities... Wearable technology will be popular... Beyonce will take home a grammy... New England will win the Super Bowl... The Apple Watch will become a big hit...

And **Alabama will beat Florida State for the national title...** which we know won't happen since both teams lost on New Year's Day. ***That's a Bing that's a Bust.*** Obviously, *Bing internet predictions are far from perfect.*

As are all predictions - *except for those made by God.*

Realize, in saying that God is **“the first and the last,”** the Bible places God outside of time. First and last are not points on history's timeline. *First is before the beginning, and last is after the end...* When we state that **“God is eternal”** it's not that we're saying

God has lots of time, as much as He dwells outside of time altogether.

Einstein proved that time is a physical property relative to other physical properties like space, matter, energy.

Thus, just as God is greater than matter or energy, He is also superior to time. He dwells outside of our time domain. This is how He is simultaneously *first and last*.

In Revelation 1:8 Jesus uses this same sense when He speaks of Himself as the God “**who is and who was, and who is to come**” - and all at the very same time.

Isaiah 57:15 speaks of God’s eternal nature, “**Thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity...**” He occupies a dimension unlimited by time and space.

And it’s from this perch, outside of time, that God sees the end of things from their beginning. Thus, He delights in predicting the future. This proves His eternal nature.

In fact, the next chapter, Isaiah 45, lays out one of the boldest predictions in all the Bible. God through Isaiah, mentions by name a future ruler who’ll conquer Babylon, and permit the Jews to return to their promised land.

God foretells the rise of a Persian king named **Cyrus**.

It’s an amazingly detailed and specific prophecy. *But what’s most important is what it teaches us about God.*

He was there in your past. He's here in your present. And He'll be there in your future, *whatever unfolds*. Call upon His name, for Jesus is “***the first and the last.***”

And I think this is a great passage to contemplate at the beginning of a brand New Year. *Is Jesus your first and your last? And if He is, how then should you live?*

Here's a way we can know for sure we're walking in the will of God... **Are my actions modeling His story? And are my ambitions about bringing Him glory?**

Once a farmer was in his fields, when he saw clouds forming overhead. They seemed to be creating letters in the sky - clearly a "P" and a "C." The farmer took it as a sign from God. He should, **"Preach Christ."** The next day, he sold his farm and went off to enroll in the seminary.

After three years he graduated. Got his first pastorate.

He preached his inaugural sermon, *but it was awful.* I mean horrible. *So boring!* Afterwards, one of the church elders familiar with the pastor's testimony approached him, and asked, **"Pastor, when you saw that "P" and "C" in the sky are you sure God wasn't saying, "Plant Corn?"**

As a pastor, the question I get asked more than any other, is, **"How do you discover God's will of your life?"**

And there's a passage I like to reference. Colossians 3:15 states, **"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts..."**

The Greek word translated **"rule"** can actually be rendered, **"umpire."** Paul is saying let God's peace umpire - decide what's in and out of God's strike zone.

If you have a peace about a decision - *go for it.* If your conscience or spirit puts up a red flag - *then back off.*

And I like that thinking *to a point*. The problem is discerning God's peace, and avoiding self-deception.

I've had dating couples tell me they prayed about sleeping together until they got God's peace to do so... Or guys who felt *at peace* fudging an expense report...

How foolish! God never gives us a peace to do what His Word has forbidden us to do. Far too often we talk ourselves into sin. We can justify doing as we please.

Resist God's will long enough - rationalize what you desire to do long enough - harden your heart long enough - and God will turn you over to a bad decision.

Bill Klem was a professional baseball umpire from 1901 to 1941 - 37 years. He was **"the father of umpires."**

Over the course of his colorful career, Bill umpired in eighteen World Series. He was the first umpire to employ hand signals in his calling of balls and strikes.

Bill was known as **"the Old Arbitrator."**

Once, after a pitch was thrown, Bill waited a little longer than usual to make his call. The young batter, turned and snorted at Bill, **"Well, was it a ball or a strike?"** Bill answered, **"Sonny, it ain't nothing till I call it!"**

And that's how I feel about the will of God. I want to hear God call it, **"in"** or **"out."** And this is what happens when we make Jesus *our first* and *our last*. If He's our *first consideration* and *end objective* we'll know His will.

When you're guided by **His story** - when you're living for **His glory** - you can be sure you're walking in His will.

Remember, Jesus is **the first**... *in time, in order, in rank, in every way...* but perhaps most importantly, *in example...* He's modeled how God wants us to do life.

He was *dependent on God* and *focused on others*.

Jesus was humble. Rather than intimidate people, He felt their hurts. He showed He cared and spoke the truth. Jesus extended grace. He was lavish with His forgiveness. He gave out second chances. He was kind.

And here's the will of God for us... *Do the same*.

He's "**the first**..." and we're to follow.

You could say Jesus was the **first**, fully functioning human being who every lived on planet Earth. His focus was unclouded by sin. And He established a pattern...

Here's how you know you're walking in God's will - **are you doing it the way Jesus would've done it?**...

Are you loving in an unselfish, sacrificial way?

Are you seeking to serve, rather than be served?

Are you putting their interests ahead of your own?

Do you live for eternity rather just than here and now?

Do you care about character and purity - yours and the other person's?... Are you patient about it, and humble about it, and kind about it, and truthful about it?

I'm not worry about *what it is*... as much as I am *how you're going about it*... Because if you're doing it *the Jesus way*, then *the what* tends to take care of itself.

Is Jesus *“the first...”* Are you modeling **His story**?

And is Jesus *“the last...”* In the end do you really want to bring **Him glory**? In your heart, if it's about making Jesus famous, then it's probably pleasing to God.

I read recently, that over the last ten years a shift has occurred in the television marketed to pre-teens.

In 1997, the #1 value promoted on television was **“community feeling, being part of a group.”** Today, that **“community feeling”** ranks 11th... The #2 value in 1997 was **“benevolence or kindness”** - that now ranks 13th.

In 2014 the number one value promoted to pre-teens on television is **“fame.”** Kid's today want to be famous.

When asked whether they'd prefer being the President of Harvard University or the personal assistant to their favorite celebrity - they chose *assistant to Justin Bieber*. Their top desire is fame, and they don't even know why.

Yet this isn't hard to figure out. Just examine the human heart. Self-glory is every one's driving ambition.

To look better than we are... To come across more spiritual - more noble - more this or that - than we really are. The desire to be liked and popular never subsides.

It's a temptation to us all. It's born out of *“pride.”*

Wouldn't it be great, if we started this new year with one simple goal... *To make Jesus our first and our last?*

To do everything with **His story** and **His glory** in mind?

I love what AW Tozer once said, “Man in the plan of God has been granted considerable say; but never is he permitted to utter the first word nor the last. That is the prerogative of the Deity, and one which He will never surrender to His creatures.” God’s will isn’t repressive or domineering. It’s really quite liberating.

It certainly, spares us great pain and heartache.

God blesses us, and sets us free to paint between the lines - to express our heart and our giftedness.

All He wants is *the first word* and *the last word*. He wants us to **model His story** and **live for His glory**.

And what if we could make that our filter in 2015?

In everything we did - before we did it - we asked, “**How can I do this like Jesus, and do it for His glory?**”

Is Jesus your first and your last?

Is He the first and last of your day?

I read a study where a 1000 adults, ages 25-54, were asked what they think about when they take a shower...

Or in essence, *when they wake up and before they go to bed... their first thoughts and their last thoughts...*

Here’s the shower survey results... 1) To-do lists, 2) Problems and worries, 3) Daydreams, 4) Work.

David the Psalmist once took the same survey.

His response is in Psalm 63, “**You are my God; early will I seek You... I remember you on my bed, I meditate on you in the night**

watches...” David sought the Lord early and late - first and last...
What if we did the same?

Is He the first and last of your finances?

In the OT the tithe was known as “*the first fruits.*” In an agrarian society the first of the harvest belonged to God.

As did the last... After the harvest the poor were allowed to enter the field and glean from the leftovers.

This should be our attitude... Does God get the first token - the initial 10% of what we bring in? And is He a consideration for any surplus we're blessed to retain?

Is He the first and last of your years?

Perhaps you were raised in a Christian family. You've never known a time when God wasn't in your thoughts.

You came to faith at an early age. What a blessing you've received. The Lord Jesus was *the first* in your life.

Now make Him *the last*. Continue in your faith. Die with your boots on, *serve the Lord to the last*. Give Him all you've got to the very end. Make Jesus first *and last*.

Is He the first and last of your week?

We think of Sunday as the end of our week, *but it's not*. Sunday is the first day of the week - the Lord's Day.

We start our week with the worship of God, and the fellowship of the saints, and the study of His Word, and a recommitment of our faith, and hope for our future. I'm glad you're here today to make Jesus *first* in your week.

But also make Him *last*... End each week recounting your blessings, and confessing your sins, and seeking healing for your hurts. Give Jesus the last of your week.

Is He the first and last of your business?

Is **His story** your first consideration at work? To be a servant, to assist the people around you, to show His love... And is **His glory** your ultimate aim? To give back to Him the credit for whatever success your efforts bring.

Is He first and last of your marriage and family?

You and your wife once saw your marriage as God's will - His blessing. Why has it become such a burden? Jesus was there in *the first*. He'll sustain you in *the last*.

The same Lord who helped you raise your babies will give you wisdom in guiding your teens. I hate to tell some of younger parents, but we've done more serious parenting since they left High School than beforehand.

The role of a parent gets more demanding, not less. A parent needs Jesus to be both their *first* and their *last*.

And is Jesus the first and last of your affections?

There is a graveyard in Cairo, Egypt at the end of a garbage filled alleyway. And it has a surprise tombstone.

It marks the grave of William Borden, heir to the famous Borden Diary family. A millionaire at 21, young William gave all his wealth to missions, and set out for China to reach Muslims with the Gospel. On his way he stopped in Cairo to learn Arabic. There he contracted spinal meningitis and he died suddenly at the age of 25.

The inscription on Borden's grave reads, "Apart from faith in Christ there is no explanation for such a life."

What a statement to earn for your tombstone. His heart was on fire for Jesus and that love never faded.

In contrast to William Borden, in Revelation 2:4 it was the church at Ephesus that had the tragic review. Jesus said to them, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love." Their love for Jesus chilled. It grew cold.

Don't you want your *last love* for Him to be as passionate as *your first*? Today, let's fan the flame! Let's make Jesus *the first and last* of our heart's affections.

And finally, is Jesus the first and last of your salvation?

If He's not, you have a flimsy salvation. *Is He not first?* If your hope is based on anything other than His work on the cross - His righteousness - your faith is misplaced?

If you think you're saved because you're a good person, or you've gone to church most of your life, or you mumbled a prayer you didn't understand, or you jumped through some religious hoops - *you're wrong*.

Jesus is first in salvation! He alone can save!

And Jesus is last in salvation, as well! He keeps us saved. He saves *from the guttermost to the uttermost*.

He can take a childhood commitment and honor it for a lifetime. He hears a single cry of faith, and overlooks a lifetime of failure, in order to save the source of that cry!

Say, it's been a while - you've lived through some ups and downs - but you haven't let go. You're still holding on to Jesus. Well, realize, Jesus is enough! He is sufficient.

You need nothing else, but Him. Don't think you have to add to *what Jesus has done* or *who Jesus is* - you don't! Jesus offers a *complete salvation*, all by Himself. Just strengthen your grip on Him! Trust a little tighter.

Let me close by reading again the rhetorical question posed in Isaiah 44:8. Jesus asks it to answer it. He speaks, **“Is there a God besides Me?”** And then His answer, **“Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one.”**

Jesus is the mighty rock. Weather and time have done nothing to erode His strength or weaken His promises.

Lean on Him and He will never let you down.

On this first Sunday of 2015, let's make Jesus *our first* and *our last*. **Model His story! Live for His glory!** Think of Him first. Consider Him last. And you'll walk in His will.