

**SERMON – 09/13/09**  
**THE GRAND SWEEP series**  
*“Building the Kingdom, pt.1: Prophets, Priests & Kings”*

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night...” (Psalm 1:1-2)

- The Bible has long been known to be one of THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS that have ever been written...
  - And many want to follow the words of this Psalm... and spend time meditating on God’s law “day and night”...
  - However, the Bible has also been seen as hard to understand... difficult to comprehend... frustrating novices & believers alike.
- Welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> week in a 4-part sermon series entitled, “THE GRAND SWEEP: (re)Discovering the Bible”...
  - The goal of this series is to lift up the “big picture” of the Bible... the major themes that seem to flow throughout its pages...
  - So that when you sit down to “meditate on God’s law” day and night... it won’t be so confusing to you.
  - Last week we looked at THE BEGINNING... and traced God’s hand through the first 5 books of the Old Testament...
  - We were reminded that the ultimate “big picture” of scripture... is a love story between God and humankind... despite the ways that we fall short & rebel from God’s love.
- When we left off last week, Moses had led the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt... and they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land...
  - Today we’re going to look at the remaining 34 books in the OT...
  - Once again I’m extremely grateful to Rev. J. Ellsworth Kalas’ book, *A Hop, Skip, and a Jump through the Bible*.
  - He helped me distill much of what I wanted to say to you today...
  - So grab your Bibles... and strap on your seatbelts... because we’re going to be flying!!!

- I encourage you to at least turn to the start of each book of the Bible as I talk about it... whether or not we pause for any specific passages in that book.

We begin with the book of JOSHUA... and have to ask the question, “How do you succeed a legend?”

- That was Joshua’s task, as he was tabbed to replace Moses as the one to lead the people into the Promised Land...
  - Joshua 1:5-6... “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them.”
  - Joshua is reminded that he needs to be faithful to the commands of the LORD that were given to Moses...
- Remember the spying expedition from Numbers that got the people in trouble last week?
  - As Joshua enters the Promised Land, he too, sends out spies... but not 12 like before... just 2 this time!
  - In chapter 2, we find their story of scouting out the town of Jericho.
  - These two spies end up taking refuge in the house of a prostitute, Rahab (talk about the beginning of a good story!)... who, in her act of hiding them, becomes an “honorary Israelite”... and is saved when they eventually destroy the city.
  - Not only that, but Rahab marries into the nation... and becomes one of the ancestors of Jesus (per the Gospel of Matthew!).
- The rest of the book of Joshua deals with the military activities of a people coming into a new land... that already had their own people living there!
  - There are battles & bloodshed... fighting & diplomacy... as this fledgling nation seeks to find their own place in the world...

JUDGES is a very interesting book. (In fact, our youth group has been reading through the book of Judges this summer – quite the juicy stories!)

- Those who led Israel between Joshua and King Saul were referred to as “judges.”
  - They were part-time leaders, whose basic role was to settle disputes.
  - Some of the more notable judges were Deborah, Gideon & Samson...
- But the over-arching theme in Judges went something like this...

- The people of Israel prospered... and forget about God in their lives...
  - They follow other gods... and soon their enemies overwhelm them...
  - They live in misery for a period of time... then cry out to God for help...
  - Who sends them a redeeming judge... so they again have peace & prosperity...
  - Until they forget about God... and the cycle continues!
- It's a cycle that we often repeat over and over again in our own lives, don't we?!?

RUTH... is popularly known as one of the greatest love stories ever written!

- (Ruth 1:1ff.) *“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife, Naomi...”*
  - Two disturbing things are mentioned here... first, of course, is the FAMINE... which prompts Elimelech & family to leave the country...
  - But what's also disturbing is WHERE they chose to flee – Moab!
  - The book of Deuteronomy told the Hebrew people to never welcome a Moabite into Israel... “even to the 10<sup>th</sup> generation!” (Deut. 23:3-4)...
  - So it was unthinkable that an Israelite would choose to move to Moab!
- But Elimelech & family go... and after living there for a decade, tragedy strikes...
  - Elimelech dies in Moab... but to make matters worse, so do their 2 sons!
  - Leaving Naomi alone with her two Moabite daughters-in-law...
  - In biblical times such as these, a woman was only valued by the men she had in her life (husband and/or sons)... so Naomi chooses to return to Bethlehem...
  - Ruth, her daughter-in-law, pledges unwavering loyalty to Naomi... and chooses to leave her country & people to follow Naomi back to Israel.
- It's back home in Bethlehem that an unlikely romance develops between Ruth & a much older man named Boaz... who just happens to have a kinship responsibility to Ruth's deceased husband...
  - And at the end of the book, we learn that the child born to Ruth & Boaz... will become the grandfather of the yet-to-be-born great King David!
  - (Who, in turn, is an ancestor of Jesus!)

- So the book of Ruth tells us that God has a place in his divine plans for even hated neighbors, like the Moabites!

Next we come to the books of FIRST & SECOND SAMUEL...

- Dr. Kalas comments that **SAMUEL** was one of those “miracle babies,” born to parents when natural circumstances said that a birth was impossible...
  - Dedicated to God at a young age by his wonderful mother, Hannah... Samuel served the aged priest, Eli, in the tabernacle of God.
  - It was here, as a lad, that God first spoke to Samuel... and kept on speaking to him over the entire course of his life!
- In time, Samuel became a judge in Israel... and in many ways was the most notable of Israel’s judges... as he was also their unequivocal spiritual leader!
  - But unfortunately, his sons did not follow in his footsteps of righteousness...
  - (*1 Sam.8:4-5*) “Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, ‘You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.’”
  - This may not seem like much... but it’s actually HUGE!
  - “We want to be like everyone else,” they said! But they weren’t like everyone else... they had been chosen to be set apart by God as a holy people!
  - They were the original “one nation under God,” for **GOD WAS THEIR KING!**
  - This request was literally a rejection of God’s rule over them... and neither Samuel nor God liked it...
  - But God gave them what they asked for.
- **SAUL** was the first king of Israel... a young man of great promise... tall, dark & handsome... and from the tribe of Benjamin.
  - But power and the adulation that comes with it, is intoxicating...
  - And through a series of events, Saul overstepped his bounds as king... so God chose to eventually remove him from the throne.
  - Dr. Kalas notes that there are few biblical characters who plummeted as dramatically & tragically as did Saul...
- The new king chosen by God was a simple shepherd boy by the name of **DAVID**...

- David has, by far, more chapters than any other character in all of the Old Testament...
- He was a musician... athlete... warrior... and had a gift for friendship.
- He was taken into the royal household by King Saul himself... and eventually succeeded him as king – but Saul did not leave willingly!
- The David Saga is filled with intrigue, deception, excitement, passion, danger, etc. (it's a great read!)...
- It was actually David's strengths that led to his downfall... as a father, a husband, and a king...
- David reigned 40 years, and is seen by most as Israel's greatest king... he would become the measure of excellence for all future kings.

I'd like to combine our discussion the next 4 books: I,II KINGS & I,II CHRONICLES... for they basically tell the same stories...

- When David left the throne, he named his son, **SOLOMON** as the new king (which was not without controversy, even within his own family)...
  - Solomon was not David's firstborn... but rather was the son he had later in life with his wife, Bathsheba...
  - When David died, one of the pieces of "unfinished business" that he wanted Solomon to accomplish, was the construction of a Temple... a place where the Hebrew people could come and worship God.
  - Solomon began his reign wonderfully... when God appeared to him in a dream & invited him to ask for anything he wanted... Solomon chose to ask for discernment & wisdom.
  - God honored that choice, and gave it to Solomon in abundance!
  - What got Solomon into trouble, however, was his love of women... you see, Solomon decided, quite cleverly, that the best way to ensure peace with neighboring nations would be to marry the daughters of their rulers...
  - So marry he did... (1 Kings 11:3-4) *"Among (Solomon's) wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David."*
  - Yes, you read that correctly... 1,000 wives... I know... it boggles the mind!

- So here’s what happened... all of these wives were political alliances... and each of them came with their own faith traditions... their own gods...
- Solomon never stopped worshipping God... but over time, he joined his wives in their worship, too... something that did not please God.
- Solomon’s son was **REHOBAM**... and he had barely assumed the throne when Jeroboam, an especially able leader, brings a delegation from the 10 northern tribes of Israel...
  - You see, Solomon had made life very hard on his people in the north... so Jeroboam wanted to know if Rehoboam would negotiate a better arrangement.
  - Rehoboam asks for 3 days to consider the request...
  - And during that time, he consults with 2 groups of people – older men (who had been advisors to his father), and younger men (from his own generation).
  - He sided with the advice of the younger men... and told Jeroboam, basically, “If you thought my Dad was rough on you... you ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”
  - That did not sit well with the northern delegation...
  - **AND FROM THIS TIME FORWARD... the nation of Israel split in two!**
  - The 10 tribes in the north chose to become their own nation... and were known as ISRAEL... while the 2 southern tribes (Judah & Benjamin), were known as JUDAH.
  - A majority of the tribe of Levi was also in the south, since that’s where Jerusalem & the Temple were...
  - [As a side note, when the Levites were chosen to be the priestly tribe, they lost their land status... but the tribe of Joseph had actually become 2 tribes through his 2 sons: Ephraim & Manasseh. Those are the names you’ll hear throughout the rest of the OT.]
- The splitting of the Kingdom was a **major turning point** in the history of the Hebrew people... and not a good one at that...
  - Much of the history that follows is rather bleak... especially for the 10 northern tribes.
  - Judah had its good periods... notably with Kings Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Uzziah, Hezekiah & Josiah)... but Israel (in the north) **did not have 1 good king!**
  - The ethics, morality & spirituality of the northern kings were extremely wanting.
- **ELIJAH & ELISHA** were prophets to the 10 northern tribes...
  - Unfortunately, the people never really returned to the LORD under their ministry.

- But through it all, they both remained faithful to their call... (and there are some quite amazing stories about them both!).
- The next MAJOR EVENT in the life of the Hebrew people occurred in 722 BCE... when the **Assyrians** (the dominant military power in that era) defeated the northern tribes of Israel.
  - They took captive the best & brightest of the people... and resettled them among their own territories (which was a common practice in that day).
  - The biblical writers of these books will tell you that this happened because the people had sinned against the LORD...
  - So the Assyrians took the Israelites from the north & settled them into the land of Samaria... along with other conquered peoples from other areas in the region.
  - And other people bring other gods... and, over time, the exiled Hebrews in Samaria did what Solomon had done, and began to incorporate other religious practices into their own worship of God.
  - And these relocated people would come to be known as... SAMARITANS (at least by the time we get to the New Testament!)...
  - Which is why the Hebrew people from the south had such a hard time with Samaritans... for they used to be their own flesh & blood... but allowed their faith to be corrupted by other religions...
- Well, the people in the southern kingdom, Judah... managed to survive on their own for a century after the north fell to Assyria...
  - But eventually the Babylonians (who had taken over as the superpower in the region) captured Jerusalem...
  - Again, biblical historians will tell you that the Jews in the south had, like their northern counterparts, sinned so greatly... that God allowed a foreign army to overpower them.
  - And once again, the best & the brightest were carried away... but this time, to Babylon (present day Iraq!)... leaving only the poorest of the poor back in Judah.
  - It was during this time of transition in Judah that the prophet Jeremiah was called to speak to the word of God to them... and they didn't want to hear it!

The book of ESTHER is set in the period of time when the people of Judah are in Babylonian captivity...

- It's basic plot is a familiar one in Israel's history...
  - An enemy of the Jewish people (a man named Haman) sought to destroy the Jews...
  - But through some divine intervention, Haman himself is destroyed.
- This book is unique in that the name of God is never mentioned... but events unfold as if choreographed by an unseen, all-knowing power...

By the time we get to the books of EZRA & NEHEMIAH, the 10 northern tribes of Israel are lost to history, following their conquest by the Assyrians...

- The marvel, of course, is that the same thing did not happen to the southern tribes of Judah, when they were conquered by the Babylonians... WHY?
  - First, with the temple in Jerusalem, Judah had been more “nourished” spiritually... and even though the people & leaders wandered spiritually, there was always a place to return...
  - Second, the people had the prophet Ezekiel with them in captivity... who encouraged them & challenged them to remain faithful.
  - Third, Judah had the literature of the faith... much of the books we now call the OT originated from the southern tribes...
  - AND they had two great leaders: Ezra & Nehemiah...
- When the Babylonians finally let the Hebrew people return to their homeland, **Ezra & Nehemiah** were the ones who guided the rebuilding process...
  - They started by rebuilding the walls of the city... then moved to rebuilding the Temple!
  - They also called the people back to faithfulness... and challenged them not to become entangled with people of other religious backgrounds (which may seem a bit harsh today, but given Israel's history, was very important at that time!).
  - It was during the period of Ezra & Nehemiah that the Hebrew people started reading from their sacred writings... they started to become, as Dr. Kalas puts it, ‘people of the book.’

Let's take a step back for a moment... in order for a plot to get anywhere, there has to be some reflecting on life's purpose & meaning...

- When David became king, the people suddenly had, for the first time ever, secure & safe borders... so they could devote time to writing down their history!
  - They could also devote time to poetry & philosophy...
  - The books we're about to discuss are usually classified as WISDOM LITERATURE... most of which are written via poetry.

The book of JOB tells the story about a man named Job, "blameless & upright" who loved God & lived right...

- Then, in an astonishing series of disasters, Job loses virtually everything...
  - His daughters and sons... his extensive wealth... his health... his community standing...
  - This book seeks to answer the age-old question: **Why do bad things happen to good people?**
  - The popular answer, at this time, was... if bad things are happening, then God was punishing you for your sins.
- In the end, God does not answer that question... except to make it clear that God is God... and God is in control.

The book of PSALMS... is the longest book in the Bible... with its 150 chapters...

- Some quick facts about Psalms...
  - It contains both the shortest chapter in the OT (Psalm 117)...
  - As well as the longest chapter in the OT (Psalm 119)...
  - It's popularly referred to as "The Psalms of David," though David is actually credited with only 73 of the 150...
- The psalms are the prayer book of the Jewish people... but as scholars & casual observers have noted, we Christians have "baptized the Psalter into Christ"...
  - New Testament writers quoted freely from the psalms...
  - Even Jesus, while hanging on the cross, quoted the words from Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"
  - Generations of believers have found that this remarkable book not only captures their faith better than almost any other...
  - It also expresses their despairs... their longings... their hopelessness... and their hope!

The book of PROVERBS... contains down-to-earth wisdom, on a variety of topics... the kind of wisdom your grandparents would probably give you!

ECCLESIASTES... is a collection of philosophical reflections from a person who had everything... and yet, it all seemed like “vanity.”

- The writer was frustrated that the same fate comes to both the righteous & the wicked... he can't find any justice in this universe...
- In the end, he says it all comes down to this: fear God, and keep his commandments...
  - (Sounds quite similar to the command that was given Joshua at the start of his leadership... and that was originally communicated to the people through Moses!)

THE SONG OF SOLOMON... is a love song...

- It's a book about two people wonderfully in love... with their feelings recorded by a master poet...
- Rabbinical scholars often interpreted this book as a mirror of God's love for Israel... and Christian scholars as God's love for the church...
  - But neither thought should distract from the very beautiful, candid, and actually quite erotic expression of human love.

We've looked at Poets, Priests & Kings... now to finish our treatment of the Old Testament, we turn our attention to the **PROPHETS**...

- Dr. Kalas remarks that the work of the prophets was sometimes to correct the present (preaching)... and sometimes to lift up the future (predicting)...
  - Most of the Biblical kings... even at their worst... were spiritual enough to seek out the prophets in times of confusion or trouble...
  - The prophet's stock in trade was “a word from the LORD”... and they offered it freely, including occasions when it wasn't always welcome!
  - We humans need sometimes to be told that we are wrong... and at other times to be embraced. The prophets were effective at both!

- ISAIAH... is the first of the “major prophets” (ie. longest prophetic books) to be quoted in the New Testament...
  - It’s quoted in the birth story of Jesus (“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...” {Isaiah 9:2-7})...
  - Isaiah 9:6 describes a coming ruler as “The Prince of Peace” (which we apply to Jesus!)...
  - Isaiah 52 & 53 are brought up during Holy Week... passages referred to as “The Suffering Servant”. New Testament writers refer to these chapters 10x in their interpretation of the suffering of Jesus.
  - Jesus’ first sermon was from Isaiah 61:1... “The spirit of the LORD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me... to bring good news to the oppressed...”
- JEREMIAH’s call came when he was young... a youth, to be exact!
  - Jeremiah had the unenviable task of having to announce judgment on his own nation... that it would be overthrown by the Babylonians...
  - Not only that, but Jeremiah also insisted that the people should not resist the invading army... because it was god’s judgment upon them!
  - Jeremiah had a rough life & ministry in southern Judah... for virtually no one wanted to hear the words that God was calling him to say.
  - But even in the midst of this foreboding ministry, Jeremiah also spoke words of hope & encouragement... specifically chapter 31, where God promises to write his law on the hearts of the people!
- LAMENTATIONS... is a book that appears to have been written around the time of the Babylonian invasion of Judah & the destruction of the temple...
  - The pages of this short book are ripe with profound sorrow...
  - Yet, in the end, the writer remarks: “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22-23).
- EZEKIEL... was the spiritual leader of the Hebrew people in Babylonian captivity...
  - His key vision is the recorded in chapter 37... where he finds himself in a Valley of Dry Bones, asking God if these bones (symbolic of the Hebrew people) can ever live again...
  - God answers in the affirmative... which brings hope to a captive people!

- The last 9 chapters of the book describe what it will be like for the people when they're restored back to their land & Temple by the LORD...
- DANIEL is a book that combines prophetic visions with stories of Daniel & his friends...
  - It's set in Babylonian captivity... and the heroic miracle stories of Daniel & Co. (Lion's Den, Fiery Furnace, etc.)... were meant to encourage & inspire the Jews during their exile...
- HOSEA... in a very dramatic way, portrays the love of God for his people... through the relationship of Hosea & his wife (who was a prostitute, by the way!).
- The main message of JOEL is centered on a locust invasion... as the prophet sees the tragedy that's affecting the land as a time of judgment... but not without hope!
  - *"Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts, not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..." (Joel 2:12-13)*
- AMOS... was a resident of Judah, in the south... but called by God to be a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel!
  - Amos called the people away from their sinful practices in life, and back to what God desires most...
  - *(Amos 5:21,24) "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*
- OBADIAH... deals with the Edomites (who were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother – so they were like cousins to Israel!)...
  - When some of the Jews fled Jerusalem during the Babylonian invasion... Edom turned them over to the Babylonians...
  - God calls Obadiah to hold the Edomites accountable...
- JONAH... is perhaps one of the most well-known of the minor prophets... who learned (via the belly of a fish) that God loves even the most wicked people... and desires that ALL come to repentance!
- MICAH... had a powerful message of justice for God's people – something that was solely lacking at that time...

- *(Micah 6:8) “And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?!”*
- NAHUM... is dated by scholars around the fall of Nineveh (which was the wicked city Jonah preached against)...
  - Nahum rejoices in the judgment that the Assyrians have suffered, because he feels they are being punished for their brutality (something Jonah was hoping would happen!).
  - At the same time, the prophet warns his own people that similar judgment could come to them if they didn’t practice righteousness...
- HABAKKUK... is grieved by the wickedness of his people in the south (Judah)...
  - He feels they should be brought to judgment...
  - Yet is uncomfortable when God suggests it’s going to be the Babylonians who will carry out that judgment!
- ZEPHANIAH... was writing around the time of King Josiah (one of the most godly of all of Judah’s kings!).
  - Yet he predicts a “day of distress & anguish, a day of ruin & devastation, a day of darkness & gloom”... because the people “have sinned against the LORD” (Zeph. 1:15, 17).
- HAGGAI & ZECHARIAH... deal with the same issue... after the Jews have returned from captivity in Babylon... and had begun rebuilding their nation...
  - After a while, they slacked off on the rebuilding... and **Haggai** encourages them to redouble their efforts on the Temple...
  - **Zechariah** has a series of exotic visions – of the people and nation restored... including seeing children & the elderly once again back in Jerusalem’s streets!
- And finally... we come to the book of MALACHI...
  - The last book in the Old Testament...
  - Malachi means “my messenger”... and was probably written around the time of the Persian/Babylonian period.
  - Its ending seems a perfect transition to the New Testament... as it predicts a return of the prophet Elijah... a role soon to be fulfilled by John the Baptist.

**WHEW!** That was a lot, my friends... if you’re still awake, kudos to you!

- Actually, what we covered today is very important in understanding the GRAND SWEEP of the Bible...
  - For we were shown how a people... chosen & set apart... given love, guidance & grace from Above...
  - Somehow... continue to turn away from God... over and over again...
  - God sent prophets, priests & kings to try and turn them back (some were more effective than others)...
  - But by the time we get to the end of the Old Testament... nothing has seemed to work...
- God has spent centuries trying to woo his people into loving relationships with himself & others...
  - It looks like God needs to try a new tact...
  - Which is where we'll start up... NEXT WEEK...
  - I hope you'll be here to join us... AMEN.