

SERMON – 09/20/09
THE GRAND SWEEP – week 3
“A New King: Jesus and the Early Church”

In the beginning... there was God. And God called a tiny group of people to be a “chosen race, a royal priesthood”...

- But over time, the people said... “We want a real king... a king like everyone else has!”
 - And so God gave them Saul... then David... then Solomon...
 - And then a whole lot of mostly forgettable kings...
 - Like Rehoboam... Jeroboam... Zimri... Omri... Jehu... Ahaz... & Zedekiah.
 - (Though there were a few good ones along the way)
- And as the kings went bad, the people followed...
 - So God sent various prophets to try and bring the people back into right relationship with Him and each other...
 - But by the time we get to the end of the Old Testament... things aren’t looking very good.

Welcome to the 3rd week in our on-going sermon series entitled, “THE GRAND SWEEP: (re)Discovering the Bible”...

- If you’re just joining us, we’ve been trying to step back and see the Big Picture when it comes to the storyline in the Bible...
 - What is the Bible trying to say as a whole?
 - We begin with the understanding that the Bible is a record of God’s relationship with humanity...
 - And today we’re ready to make the jump from the Old Testament to the New Testament...
- Towards the end of the Old Testament... the Hebrew people had returned from captivity in Babylon & Persia... and had rebuilt Jerusalem & the Temple.
 - However... over 400 years pass before the writers begin composing what we have come to call the New Testament.

- During that time, the Romans have taken control of the region... and the Jewish community had to endure quite a bit of hardship.
- Quite a bit of this is recorded in a collection of books called the Apocrypha... it's just not a part of most of our Bibles.
- Looking at the BIG PICTURE at this juncture, it might be said that the Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Jesus...
 - It helps us see how humankind got off the wrong track over and over again... and how nothing God tried was able to bring us back into right relationship.
 - The New Testament, then, tells the story of Jesus... his ministry... his teachings... and subsequent followers.
 - Through it all, God continued to pursue us with God's inexhaustible love!

Now before we get into the specifics of the New Testament... I thought it would be helpful for you to get a perspective on when the various books came to be...

- If we put Jesus' birth at the transition between BC and AD...
 - His death & resurrection would then be around 33AD...
 - It wasn't until the early 50's when the first of the New Testament books were written... Paul's 1st letter to the church in Thessolonia.
 - The Gospels – the accounts of Jesus' life – didn't get written until approximately 70AD... and Matthew & Luke probably didn't get written for another 20+ years!
 - So close to half a century passes between the time Jesus was alive... and the followers of Jesus would pass on stories about him via word of mouth...
 - Only later did those stories that were of most significance & importance to the early community actually get put into writing!
- At the time of Jesus' ministry... there were 3 major groups in Judaism...
 - First were the **Pharisees**... they were the most respected group.
 - They were very focused & intent on keeping the Biblical law (in fact, they believed if every Israelite kept every law for just one day, the Messiah would come!)...
 - The Pharisees felt it was their duty to explain & interpret the law to the people...

- [Next were the **Sadducees**... and they were the people in power in first-century Judaism...
- They ruled the Temple... which was a profitable enterprise...
- And they submitted to the authority of the Romans... knowing that if they didn't, they'd no longer be in power.
- But the largest group, by far, were the **common people**...
- The rulers called them "the people of the earth"... they were fishermen, craftsmen, day laborers, farmers, etc.
- They had absolutely no political or economic clout... and no intellectual standing.
- These are the ones that Jesus was so drawn to... and were drawn to him.

There's no way I can exhaustively summarize all of the Gospels in just a short amount of time today... so let me begin by stating some of the key points about Jesus' ministry that I find especially powerful...

- One of the first things that Jesus proclaimed was that "**The Kingdom of God was at hand**"...
 - This was his way of saying that all of God's past dealings with his creation were coming to a climax & fruition... now, with him.
 - The grand sweep was moving through Jesus...
 - Now, it's true that the people were waiting for a Messiah... but their expectations of what God's "Chosen One" would be like... and Jesus' understanding of who God was calling him to be... were quite different!
- Second, Jesus brought **good news to the poor, outcast & oppressed**...
 - When he preached his very first sermon recorded in scripture, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah... telling all that his ministry would be about bring relief to those whom society had already "kicked to the curb"...
 - As you can imagine... this got the common people quite inspired & excited!
- Third, Jesus said in John's gospel that **he came to bring life in all its abundance**...
 - It's not just about "getting into heaven"... or what life might be like after we leave this earth...
 - Jesus came to help people experience the fullness of life here and now...

- He came to help us find what makes a truly meaningful life!
- Fourth, as Jesus preached & taught about the Kingdom of God (often using parables, or stories)... he said over and over again that in order **to find life, they must lose their own!**
 - What does that mean?
 - When you give yourself away for others... when you put others' needs first before your own... when you seek to serve rather than to be served... it is THEN that we begin to see how fulfilling life can truly be.
- Finally, as Jesus carried out his ministry, he found himself in sharp **conflict with those in power...**
 - The religious leaders hated how the masses of people flocked to Jesus...
 - They detested the way he flaunted their laws – especially on the Sabbath...
 - They despised how the people followed him unwaveringly...
 - So they set out to kill him.
 - As we look at THE BIG PICTURE in scripture... we see that the Kingdom of God often meets with fierce resistance... (and even still today!).

Let's move to talking about the four gospel writers... Matthew, Mark, Luke & John...

- J. Ellsworth Kalas, in his book *A Hop, Skip, and a Jump Through the Bible*, mentioned that each of these writers were “prejudiced reporters”...
 - None of them pretend to be “objective” about Jesus. They all believed he was Lord... and they wanted nothing more than to persuade their readers to believe the same!
 - Nevertheless, they are oftentimes dramatically honest...
 - And each one has a different focus on what they want to convey.
- Though similar, not all of the Gospels contain all the same stories...
 - Only Matthew & Luke tell about Jesus' birth...
 - And we know nothing about Jesus between the age 13-29!
 - But remember... these writers wrote DECADES after Jesus' life, death & resurrection. They included the stories they felt were most important to understanding who Jesus was.

- Which brings me to something that's very important for us to understand when we read each of the gospels... **above all else, the Gospels tell of Jesus' death.**
 - Dr. Kalas notes that it's as if everything else in Jesus' story is primarily a prelude to his dying... and then, of course, his resurrection.
 - What he teaches... the way he chooses to live... and the examples he leads for his disciples... all have greater power when seen in light of the crucifixion.
 - Luke emphasizes this succinctly, when he writes: *“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, (Jesus) set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51).*
 - Jesus knew that for him to lose his life, would be for the entire world to find theirs... so rather than avoid what was coming, he met it head on.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time in each of the Gospels... but I would like to give you a quick understanding of the focus each one has...

- Scholars believe that **MARK** probably wrote his gospel first...
 - It's not only the shortest of the 4, but may very well have been written to a community that was facing persecution.
 - In 70AD the Romans put down a major Jewish rebellion... and during the course of the fighting, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem (which was the center of Jewish life).
 - Mark's community was made up of Jewish Christians... and as they had to flee the city, they took with them the book of writings that their community had found important.
 - Mark reminds his believers that following Jesus will probably lead to suffering... but hold on, because God will never leave them or forsake them...
- **MATTHEW** wrote his gospel to a Christian community that was just developing as an organization...
 - Matthew frequently incorporates passages from the Old Testament... for he wanted his people to know that Jesus was the One the Hebrew Scriptures pointed to.
 - A perfect example comes right at the start...

- Matthew 1:1... *“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham...”*
- He then proceeds to trace Jesus’ lineage from Abraham... to King David (v.6)... to Josiah (v.11)... to his father, Joseph (v.16)...
- Which was important, because the Scriptures said the Messiah would come from the tribe of Benjamin... through the lineage of King David... born in Bethlehem.
- Later, Matthew quotes passages from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah, and Malachi... just to name a few!
- But as much as Matthew quotes the wisdom of the Scriptures, he wants his community to see Jesus as the New Revelation from God!
- **LUKE**’s gospel seems to have been written with a special relationship between the Church and the Roman Empire...
 - He also had a heart for the lost... the lonely... the disinherited... and the outsiders...
 - It’s a gospel that talks straightforwardly about finances & money... calling its followers to not become possessed by their possessions.
 - Luke is also the first of a two volume collection... with the book of Acts being the companion!
- Finally, the gospel of **JOHN** is completely different from the other three...
 - Dr. Kalas remarks that it’s difficult to accept unless one is a convinced believer already!
 - John likes to have Jesus interact with a character... and then carry on a rather lengthy conversation, which lays out much of the theological beliefs of his faith community!
 - John doesn’t have Jesus’ birth... but does one better... he starts in the beginning... the VERY beginning... and has Jesus as part of the Creation Story...
 - “...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace & truth.”

Before we end today, I’d like to spend a little bit of time in the Book of Acts... the author of Luke writes... *“In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the*

beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.” (Acts 1:1-2)

- Acts is the book that tells the story of how the Church came to be...
 - From a rag-tag group of followers that numbered around 120...
 - To a movement that encompassed thousands and spread throughout the entire Mediterranean region and beyond!
- Acts begins with the Resurrected Jesus... before he ascended to be with God...
 - He asked the followers to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them...
 - And on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), that happened... and people who had abandoned Jesus just a month and a half before... began proclaiming him as Lord to the throngs...
 - Acts 2:41 remarks... *“So those who welcomed (Peters’) message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching & fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v.41-42).*
- As this fledgling community grew & developed... it was not without problems...
 - Some of the leaders were targeted by the Roman government as suspected criminals... and harassed & imprisoned...
 - Within the community, greed crept in, with the story of Ananias & Sapphira (chapter 5)...
 - In chapter 6, we discover that the Greek-speaking Christians felt that their widows weren’t being cared for like the Hebrew-speaking widows...
 - So the believers appointed 7 men of spiritual maturity & wisdom to be overseers of these challenges... so the apostles could handle the “big picture” aspects of the movement.
- Among those 7 men was a man named Stephen... who, in chapters 6 and 7 gave the longest sermon recorded in Acts... recounting “The Grand Sweep” of Scripture – from Abraham to Jesus!
 - It got him killed... Stephen became the church’s first martyr!
 - Let’s pick up the story at the very end... Acts 7:57ff.:

- *“But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against (Stephen). Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”*
- Which introduces us to the next big character in the Church’s continuing story...
SAUL!
- Saul was a leader in the Jewish community (a Pharisee, to be exact)... who was extremely zealous about persecuting the Christians...
 - But God decided that Saul would make a good agent for good... and so, in chapter 9, we read all about his dramatic encounter with the LORD... and Saul’s subsequent conversion to Christianity!
 - So this anti-Christian becomes one of its strongest supporters... and goes on to help establish churches all over the Mediterranean.
 - Oh yah, God changes his name to PAUL...
 - And the rest of the book of Acts tells his story!
 - Dr. Kalas notes that in the book of Acts, 40% tells about the Acts of the Apostles... while 60% tells of the acts of one particular apostle, Paul!
 - I commend it to your reading... as it’s a story filled with espionage & intrigue... shipwrecks and sermons... and through it all, God gets the glory!

That’s where we’ll stop for today... next week, we’ll finish this series by taking a closer look at Paul’s letters to the various churches... as well as the enigma of a book known as Revelation! I hope you’ll be here to join us... AMEN.