

SERMON – 09/27/09
THE GRAND SWEEP – week 4
“Building the Kingdom, pt.2: Connection & Completion”

February 1986... I was a senior in high school on the Big Island... and I suddenly found myself involved in a highly orchestrated network of ‘clandestine communications’.

- It began with an infiltration of the administration headquarters... a ‘mole on the inside’...
 - I began receiving unsolicited correspondences... subtly delivered by my homeroom teacher every morning...
 - They were from Jody... who was working in the office as a student aide.
 - We had just begun dating... and she would write me little notes... slip them in the teacher’s morning packet... which would then be deposited on my desk.
- Over time... as interest levels increased... we expanded operations... and made it a daily occurrence.
 - We’d write each other a note... and meet just moments before school started...
 - (This was primarily due to the fact that it took me an hour to make the bus ride to school from Volcano Village to Hilo – so I usually had very little time prior to the bell ringing!)
 - So we’d meet outside one of the school buildings... say hello... and pass each other the notes...
 - Then, wait until we got to our respective homeroom classes & read the notes in privacy...
- Over time... the short notes turned into longer letters...
 - And I don’t know for sure... but I dare say that we rarely missed a morning.
 - There’s power in the written word! To any of the single young men out in worship today... I highly recommend taking up letter writing as part as your ‘romance repertoire’!

Welcome to the 4th & final week in our sermon series entitled, “THE GRAND SWEEP: (re)Discovering the Bible.”

- We've been journeying together through the Scriptures... not only getting a bit more acquainted with the various books in the Bible, but also coming to better understand THE BIG PICTURE...
 - The key themes that sweep through the pages... from Genesis through Revelation.
 - And today we're going to finish our journey...
 - We've traveled through the Old Testament... from the early mothers & fathers of the faith... to the prophets, priests & kings!
 - We jump feet-first into the New Testament... following Jesus & his disciples through the Gospels... and into the book of Acts, where the story of the early church is recorded!
 - If you missed any of the previous 3 sermons, you can find them in their entirety on our church's website... by following the sermons link on the worship page.
- Today we'll be doing a lot of "letter-reading"... as we keep up with the apostle Paul's passion for the various churches he helped start...
 - We'll discover segments of support & encouragement... challenge & chastisement... as well as hope and inspiration.
 - And we'll finish with that amazingly complex book known as Revelation... and see whether or not it truly is "THE END"!?!)
- In my preparation this week I once again relied quite heavily on J. Ellsworth Kalas' book, *A Hop, Skip & a Jump Through the Bible*.

The BIG PICTURE throughout this series has been an understanding that the Bible is a "love affair" between God and all of humankind – despite the fact that we don't always reciprocate that love!

- You may remember that last week we were introduced to a young man named Saul... a prominent up-and-coming Pharisee, who worked exceedingly hard to persecute the followers of Jesus.
 - But along the way, Saul came face to face (or at least "face to blinding light") with the Risen Jesus... and it literally changed his life!
 - God changed his name from Saul to Paul... and much of the book of Acts tells about his amazing journeys throughout the Mediterranean region, spreading the

Good News of Jesus Christ to all who would listen (and even to many who wouldn't listen!).

- Well, Paul helped start a lot of churches...
 - Actually, at the time, they were less like today's churches... and more like small groups... house churches, if you will... gatherings of believers who met in each others' homes to support & encourage one another in the faith.
 - (Which, by the way, is precisely what we're going to begin launching next year with our new satellite ministry HOUSE CHURCH initiative. So we're going back 'to our roots'!)
- So from time to time, Paul would write these "churches" a letter (or two)...
 - These are often highly personal letters... intended for a specific small group of people...
 - However, they soon went into wider publication... as people would make hand-copies of the letters and share them with other faith communities – to encourage them as well!
 - What's especially revealing about these writings from Paul, is that he doesn't "sugar coat" anything... we get to see what's really going on in the lives of these faith communities – from sexual immorality to false doctrine... and from jealousy in ministries to disagreement among the apostles...
 - Let's keep in mind as we read through these letters... that for the most part, Paul wasn't trying to "set down the doctrines of the church"... he was writing from his heart to a specific group of people, trying to help them be better followers of Jesus. Period.
 - Over time, however, we've come to see these letters as fundamental to ALL Christians!

So open your Bibles with me, as we finish our journey of THE GRAND SWEEP... Let's start with the book of ROMANS...

- This is the first of the "Letters" in the New Testament... probably because it's the longest.

- It was written at the height of Paul's career... somewhere between AD54-58... and it conveys the full richness & maturity of his experience with Christ.
- As Paul had been traveling around the Mediterranean, he had been taking up a collection from the largely Gentile (non-Jewish) churches for the poor church in Jerusalem.
- He hoped that this "love offering" would help bridge the gap between the 2 wings of the church: the Jewish Christians... and the Gentile Christians.
- Romans was written when Paul was on his way to Jerusalem to deliver the offering... and Paul was hoping to be able to travel to Rome & beyond to Spain shortly.
- Here are some of the more weighty theological understandings Paul shares in this book...
 - In chapter one, he mentions that God's power & nature have already been revealed to everyone... (v.20) *"Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."*
 - So literally EVERYONE has come to experience the presence of God... through creation... whether they recognize it or not!
 - The problem is... that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (3:23).
 - *"But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."* (5:6)
 - Despite this amazing grace, we still struggle as humans. *"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."*
 - This has been the struggle that humankind has endured since the beginning.... With Adam & Eve! We have a hard time doing what we know is right.
 - But Paul reminds us that once we've given our hearts to Christ Jesus... *"There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (8:1).
 - *"For I am convinced,"* Paul continues later in chapter 8... *"that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (8:38-39).

- There's so much more that could be said about Romans... we just don't have time to get into it all... but I highly recommend it to your devotional reading...

The books of FIRST & SECOND CORINTHIANS... are fascinating studies of how to deal with frustrating problems in a difficult congregation.

- These two books are also our most revealing insight into the personality of Paul!
 - This was one of the church communities that Paul helped establish...
 - So it pained him to hear of the struggles that they were having...
- The congregation was divided by their loyalties to the several preachers & teachers who had led them...
 - There have also been instances of sexual immorality within the membership...
 - Lawsuits between believers have broken out...
 - The people argue with one another over who's more spiritual...
 - They show preferential attitudes at the celebration of the Lord's Supper (of all places!)...
 - Some are confused about a key doctrine of their new faith – the resurrection of the dead....
 - And that's just in the first letter!
- It's out of this chaos that we get one of the most beloved chapters in all scripture... 1 Corinthians 13... aka "The Love Chapter."
 - Paul wants the people to know that no spiritual gift is more important than Christian love...
 - Which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things... for love never ends" (I Cor. 13:7-8)
- Between the first & second letters, the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians has deteriorated...
 - Much of the 2nd letter deals with this crisis of confidence between the apostle & community...
 - Because so much of 2nd Corinthians is a response to the words & feelings of others (often opponents), which are not recorded in the letter, it's sometimes difficult to follow the apostle's argument...

- But one cannot help but sense the deep passion that Paul has for not just this, but all the churches he helped establish...
- And in the end, he remains optimistic: *“Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:1).*

The letter of Paul to the GALATIANS is a crucial one, for sure...

- Written perhaps around 55AD, or slightly earlier during Paul’s 3rd missionary journey, it gives many autobiographical details of the apostle’s earlier life & evangelistic activity.
- The crux of the letter deals with the acknowledgement that “false believers” (as Paul puts it)... have come to the churches of Galatia...
 - They’ve insisted that Gentile believers (non-Jews) must be circumcised and fulfill other elements of the Mosaic Law if they are to be saved...
 - Paul absolutely rejects that idea...
 - And prior to his own conversion, you may remember how zealous Paul was about his Pharisaic Judaism!
 - And yet he declares wholeheartedly that Christ’s death on the cross is enough:
 - *“For if justification...” (or right relationship with God!)... “comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (Gal. 2:21).*
- Paul boasts in the end, that *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28).*

I don’t have time to get in to the rest of Paul’s letters... like EPHESIANS... COLOSSIANS... I & II THESSALONIANS... and PHILEMON...

- But I did want to say something briefly about PHILIPPIANS...
 - The Christian community in Philippi was the first church established by Paul on European soil...
 - And Paul seems to have had a very close & happy relationship with this church in the years that followed...
- The main theme of this letter is persistence in faith in the face of opposition... even with the threat of death!
 - Paul cites Jesus as our example... chapter 2, verse 6ff.:

- *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross...” (Phil. 2:6-8).*
- What’s especially powerful, is the fact that Paul wrote this letter... while he was IN PRISON!
 - And yet he’s quick to assure people that what has happened to him has actually helped spread the gospel!

I, II TIMOTHY & TITUS... though often credited to him, were most likely not written by Paul (though very well could have been written by his followers)...

- These might be what we call the beginning of the letters to the “next generation” of Christians...
 - The Christian church was transitions from a coalition of house churches... to some higher levels of organization...
 - So the author(s) addressed these kinds of issues... as well as opposed false teachings.

Let me quickly move through some of the remaining letters...

- HEBREWS is the only letter (other than 1st John) in which the author is not named... and it’s not addressed to a specific individual or community...
 - One of the key themes is encouraging the new believers to “keep the faith.”
 - Chapter 11 is often referred to as the “Faith Hall of Fame”... as the author leads us through a GRAND SWEEP of some of the more memorable characters in the Bible...
 - Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab... just to name a few!
 - *“Yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect” (11:39-40).*

- “(So let us) lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” (12:1-2a).
- What the writer of Hebrews is trying to say... is that WE (you and I) are now part of the plot... the Grand Sweep of God’s love & redemption with humankind...
- JAMES is a great book to follow on the heels of Hebrews... as it reminds us that as powerful as faith is... if it’s not backed up by our actions, then it’s worthless!
- I PETER... is addressed to “the exiles of the Dispersion”... reminding us that the 1st century Christians were often being exiled from their original homes during periods of persecution...
- I, II JOHN... tackle the “Gnostic heresy,” a belief that Jesus wasn’t fully human at all... he just looked! human... (but really was only divine!).
- (NOTE: I won’t mention II Peter, III John or Jude – you’re on your own for those!)

But finally, we come to THE END... and in the Bible, “the end” is a book called

REVELATION.

- Although parts of the book may have been written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD70, *The Oxford Study Bible* tell us that it’s probable that the author, whose name was John, put the book in its present form toward the close of the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (AD81-96)...
 - It was at this time that Domitian began to demand that his subjects address him as “Lord and God” and worship his image...
 - Refusing to do so, many Christians were put to death...
 - Others, like John, were exiled, and ALL were threatened.
- One of the reasons the author uses mysterious figures & extraordinary metaphors was to prevent the imperial police from recognizing that his book is a trumpet call to the persecuted...
 - Assuring them that, despite the worst that the Roman Empire could do, God reigns supreme...
 - And Christ, who died and is alive forevermore, has the power to overcome all evil!

- All of the books of the New Testament show ties with the Hebrew Scriptures.... but none more so than the book of Revelation...
 - There are 404 verses in the book... 278 of them make one or more allusions to some Old Testament passage!
- Since the language of Revelation is so dominantly symbolical, Dr. Kalas urges us not to look for too many specific applications...
 - I’ve heard many a pastor try and connect contemporary events to specific passages in Revelation...
 - It doesn’t necessarily work that way, friends...
 - Dr. Kalas encourages us to read Revelation the way we listen to classical music... enjoying the total effect without getting lost in the particulars...
- Numbers are used symbolically in the book...
 - 7 occurs frequently (7 churches, 7 lampstands, 7 seals, 7 angels with trumpets, etc.)...
 - **Seven** is the biblical number for “completeness” or “perfection”...
 - 12 is found (12 gates in the holy city, 12 foundations, 12 kinds of fruit on the tree of life, etc.)...
 - **Twelve** represents the 12 tribes of Israel... and the 12 apostles...
 - There are **twenty-four** elders before the throne of God (an addition of both the 12 tribes & the 12 apostles)...
 - And there are 144,000 “servants of God,” marked with God’s seal... this is ultimate completeness – for it’s 12 x 12...
- WORSHIP is a dominant theme in this book... as we humans are at our best when we worship the Lord... for it is then that we are caught up in the spirit of gratitude & love... and we are delivered from self-absorption.
- The culmination of this amazing book does 3 main things...
 1. Satan, the personification of evil... is forever doomed...
 2. The dead are brought to judgment...
 3. And the New Heaven & New Earth are established...

- I've mentioned over and over throughout this series, that the Bible is a record of God's love affair with the human race... despite the numerous times we've rebelled against that love...
 - One of the last images in the book of Revelation is a tree...
 - We began our series in the Garden of Eden... with a Tree that got Adam & Eve into trouble...
 - Now God brings us back full circle... Revelation 22:1-2...
 - *“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the Tree of Life with its 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”*
 - **For the HEALING of the nations....**
 - Not just for the Hebrew people... or the followers of Jesus... but God desires reconciliation & healing for ALL!
- And it is here where our book ends, but THE GRAND SWEEP continues on... through you and me... and many, many more who will come after us.

I'd like to close this series with something I received via email a while back...

- It's the entire Bible summarized in 50 words...
 - Now that we've journeyed together these past 4 weeks... see if this echoes THE GRAND SWEEP...
- God made... Adam bit... Noah arked... Abraham split... Joseph ruled... Jacob fooled... bush talked... Moses balked... Pharaoh plagued... people walked... sea divided... tablets guided... promise landed... Saul freaked... David peeked... prophets warned... Jesus born... God walked... love talked... anger crucified... hope died... Love rose... Spirit flamed... Word spread... God remained.
- May this STORY continue to become OUR STORY... as we not only read but **live out** THE GRAND SWEEP of Holy Scriptures. AMEN!