



THE RETURN HOME

Fulfillment of the Heart's Desires
Text: Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2; Zechariah 1,8

Theme: When God puts a longing in the heart to *return* to Him he provides *restoration* in abundance and the means for sustained *renewal*.

I hope you are finding this *Storyline* Series as engaging as I am. Since this is my last opportunity for a while after these four weeks of preaching, I want to reflect on one of major themes that has enriched my life.

It is been of immense value to see the unfolding story of the Lord's self-revelation in the large chunks of history. By viewing the broad strokes a pattern unfolds as to the way God works with his people. This has helped me with a problem. Yes, pastors can have struggles and questions about the way God is portrayed in Scripture. I can get bogged and confounded by certain aspects of the character of God that do not fit my picture of the way I think the Lord should operate. Frankly, I have had a difficulty squaring the ruthlessness of God toward the enemies of His people and even toward His own chosen people over against the self-sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament God inflicts punishment and the Jesus we meet in the New Testament absorbs it. At least, that is the way it may appear on the surface.

Yet the more we have followed *The Storyline*, the less concerned I have been with this apparent discrepancy between God's Old Testament justice and New Testament mercy. I have asked myself, "What has changed within me?" One of the patterns we have witnessed is that our Lord consistently warns his people about the consequences of violating his law, straying after and compromising with foreign deities and the immoral degradation that comes with it. In spite of the clarity of the Lord's expectations, the people wander away to the point where the Lord brings punishment upon them through the world's superpowers of the day, such as Assyrian and Babylon, or simply allows them to reap the moral consequences of their self-destructive behavior. As one person has put it, "If you go against the moral grain of the universe, you are going to get splinters."

But then time and again, the Lord's judgment turns to compassion. He renews his covenant and reaffirms his love as a parent for his wayward children or a husband for his whoring wife. I have come to see the Lord not so much as a hardened judge as a patient and pained lover of his people, who grieves over those to whom he has tied his affection. Because of this I have come to see myself in the weakness of the people of Israel. Their story is our story, my story. I have to admit it.



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The people of Israel were most in danger of compromise when things were going well. When they were at ease in Zion, they would lose their focus. Oh, can I relate to the verse of the hymn, "prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love"! When I was facing surgery back in June of last year knowing that I had potentially life threatening and very aggressive form of cancer, the Lord had my complete attention. I promised Him that after surgery, I would awake each day with a song in my heart in gratitude that I had one more day to live on this good earth. Yet the stronger and healthier I got the more I took his grace for granted. The daily times of prayer became a little more lax; the review of God's benefits became a little more intermittent. The slip back into normalcy is all too easy.

Observing this pattern in Israel and myself, caused me one day to sit down at my computer with a curious question, "What does it say about human beings that the primary way that we grow is through pain?" Why does it take some form of personal struggle for the Lord to keep our attention? This is not a flattering human quality. Throughout the Old Testament, the people are described as hard-hearted and stiff-necked. In other words, it takes a boulder of pain to crack open our hearts.

We don't seem to learn forward. By that I mean, when things are going well we don't seem to double-down on the self-discipline and ask the Lord to grow our hearts into all that he intends us to be. Honestly, how many of us wake up each day with these questions as our agenda: 1. Lord, how I be an instrument of your grace today? 2. How can I best serve my spouse? 3. How can I be a godly model for my children? And then at the end of each day, do we ask, "Lord, how did I do in being an instrument of grace? A servant to my spouse? A godly model for my children?"

If we are honest, we are much more like unattended gardens, which go to seed. Gardens left alone grow weeds and choke out the life. Reading the scripture in the broad strokes makes me much more sympathetic to how patient God actually is with us His recalcitrant people.

This leads us right in to where we left off *The Storyline* over the last couple of Sundays. You will recall that the Lord took up a rod of judgment in the form of the nation of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was the instrument of purification who carried away into exile the cream of the crop of the Israelite royal family. This included Daniel and his companions, as well as Ezekiel. Jeremiah issued the wringing warning that Jerusalem would be captured and



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leveled along with the beloved Solomon's temple. This all occurred according to God's plan in 586BC.

But Jeremiah had also prophesied that God's judgment would come to an end. Again God's heart would turn back to his people and his land. We see this repetition of the pattern of God's patience. Judgment is never the last word. Restoration would come again. We read in Jeremiah 29:10-11: **"This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are complete for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. [Here is the verse that many of you have claimed for yourself]. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"**

There is life after captivity. Jeremiah says that the people who have been carried off to a foreign land will be homeward bound. After 70 years judgment would come to an end, and a new life of possibilities would begin. If you begin to measure the end of captivity from 605 BC when with the first of the exiles into Babylon you arrive at the period of time for our reading this morning from Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah in 539BC. We come this morning at what is known as the post-exilic period. The people are allowed to return to their land of promise and begin to rebuild their beloved temple and the city of Jerusalem.

The return happened in four waves.

1. The first wave occurs under the edict of Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, who defeated the Babylonians in 539BC.
2. The second wave happened in 520BC when King Darius follows Cyrus.
3. The third wave does not happen until 458BC when Ezra, the priest returns to Jerusalem under King Artaxerxes.
4. The fourth wave is led by Nehemiah, the Jewish governor, who is released by the Persian King Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in 444BC.

Time Period	Persian King	Jewish Leaders
First Wave: 539BC	Cyrus the Great (550-529)	Zerubbabel, Joshua
Second Wave: 520BC	Darius the Great (521-486)	Zerubbabel, Haggai, Zechariah
Third Wave: 458BC	Artaxerxes (464-424)	Ezra, the priest
Fourth Wave: 444BC	Artaxerxes (464-424)	Nehemiah, the governor



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Our time frame this morning only encompasses waves 1 and 2 which are covered in the first 6 chapters of Ezra, with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesying during the second wave.

Return

The prophet Jeremiah said the Lord had a plan for His people that would create a future and a hope. **The first theme we see in our text is the promise of return to their homeland.** The Lord implants the deep longing to return to the place of their spiritual roots and identity. In other words, "home is where the heart is." We have all had the experience of being away from our homes for a period of time, on a business trip, a mission sojourn, or even lengthy vacation, and when we walk in the door and we say, "there is no place like home." This is what the dispersed people of Israel were feeling.

The promise of return comes from what might appear to be an unlikely source. Cyrus the King has just defeated the Babylonians and is the first Persian emperor whose kingdom will dominate for the next 200 years. He issues this edict immediately,

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:2-4)

The Persian Emperors had a very different mindset than the Babylonians with regard to allowing the various people groups to practice their own faith. As long as people did not foment rebellion there was considerable room for each group to serve their own gods, which was true of Israel. Cyrus the Great followed the Zoroastrian religion which acknowledged a supreme being with the title referenced in our Scripture, "the god of heaven." Zoroastrians were students of the heavens believing fate to be written in the stars.



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The prophets of Israel created the hope that there would one day be an opportunity to return to their homeland and rebuild the central symbol of their faith, Solomon's temple that lay in ruins. The vision of return is fueled by a deep longing, the absence of something that is vital to the soul. When there is a hole in the heart, you yearn for completion and are not complete until the time of fulfillment.

The best expression of this longing comes from Psalm 137:1-6 written during the Babylonian Captivity. Listen for the pathos in these words:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps,

for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.

Homesick. You can feel the ache in the Psalmist soul to be in his homeland. One of the contemporary ways that this longing has been expressed is in the phrase, "Next year in Jerusalem." During the persecutions of the Jewish people in the twentieth century, especially under Nazism, they kept hope alive by saying to each other, "Next year in Jerusalem."

It can be difficult for us to identify with the hopes and longings of an oppressed minority if we have not walked that journey. I have obviously not lived the African American experience; I can only attempt to empathize through personal experiences that bring heightened awareness. This is why we support opportunities like the Justice Journey that expose us to the civil rights struggles. We have certainly witnessed an amazing emotional catharsis in the African American community with the election of Barack Obama as President. I



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remember seeing a clip of an interview with Michelle Obama back in November of 2007 some two months before the first primary in Iowa. At that time Hilary Clinton held a sizeable lead in the polls over Barack Obama in the African American community. Michelle Obama was asked why she thought that was. I found her answer rather profound. She essentially said that the African American community had been disappointed so often that they did not dare to hope that this was possible. Of course, things changed overnight with Iowa primary. Perhaps the hope could be a reality after all.

We are all familiar with Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" Speech delivered from the Lincoln Memorial on August, 28, 1963. There is a little known story behind that speech, because it was almost not delivered. The emotions and tensions were running high in that crowd of 250,000 people, so President Kennedy's men convinced Dr. King to keep his rhetoric cool. Dr. King gave in and read a very careful, thoughtful speech but with none of flourish that could excite the human heart. I watched the entire speech this week. He read from a prepared text for most of it. As he was just about to turn and to be seated that day, Mahalia Jackson, the beloved singer, felt let down by the speech. As Dr. King was about to finish, she shouted out to him, "**The dream, Martin, the dream! Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!**" From the moment he began to speak his heart, he no longer read from a prepared script. He then spoke about the America that could be.

Longing. We all have longings of return in our hearts that we carry around as unfulfilled prayers. We may long for a child to come home again who has wandered away from their faith. There may be a hole in our heart for an injustice to be righted or a need to be met. It may simply be the longing to draw near to the God who promises to draw near to us.

The vision before the people of Israel was the dream to return. "**This is what the Lord says, 'I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem...I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God'**" (Zechariah 8:3, 7).

What is that vision of God that creates a longing in your heart?

Restoration

The Lord abundantly restores His people beyond what they could imagine even in the face of opposition. Yes, He had plans to give them a hope and a future. Plans beyond their wildest dreams.



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As we noted God made his provision to return through the unlikely source of Cyrus, the King of Persia. Zechariah tells us that the same Lord who could use the pagan rulers to punish can use them to bless the people. And He could use them even to counteract the forces of opposition and supply in abundance.

In the first wave of returnees to the Promised Land, there were over 42,000 people recorded in Ezra 2. They began to rebuild the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua with the full endorsement of Cyrus the King. They got as far as rebuilding the altar and laying the foundation, when the local populace pressured them into ceasing their work.

It wasn't until the second wave under King Darius in 520BC that there was a stirring commitment to complete what they started. The prophetic ministry of Haggai only lasted 4 months from August 29 to Dec. 18, 520BC. It was his role as a prophetic leader to awaken the people from their lethargy. This is what leaders do. They call the better selves out of us. We get lazy as the returnees had done. Haggai tells us the people had turned to an inward focus of filling their stomachs with food and drink, and keeping clothes on their back. This consumption with one's own needs could never provide satisfaction.

We read, "Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger gave this message of the Lord to the people: 'I am with you, declares the Lord. So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel...and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God" (Haggai 1:13-14). Of course, each time the Lord stirred up his people to work, there arose opposition. As they were commencing the restoration of the temple, the local governor Tattenai raised objections. "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?" (Ezra 5:3b) Tattenai sent an official communique to King Darius, telling him of the smoldering embers that could turn into a flame if he did not put it out. Zerubbabel recounted to Tattenai how Cyrus had issued the original edict but Tattenai wanted confirmation. Tattenai not only got confirmation of the original authorization for this project from Cyrus, but also Darius gave his full backing to the rebuilding of the temple as well as the commitment to pay for all the material expenses out of the royal treasury.

God completes what he starts and fulfills the visions and dreams of his people. Even at the completion of the altar and the laying of the foundations, the people erupt in a catharsis of emotion over God's provision. "And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of



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the temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the weeping because the people made so much noise" (Ezra 3:11b-13). Have you ever received such good news and experienced the abundance of God's provision that you were laughing and crying at the same time? Remember that moment for this is what God's people were experiencing.

Renewal

But finally, how do you sustain this reconnection to the Lord that He provides? Like I confessed earlier, God wonderfully intercedes with deliverance, yet the gratitude and connection can fade.

I began this morning by saying that we often don't seem to do very well when we are at ease in Zion. In times of peace and prosperity we tend to go to seed or are drawn away in distraction by the pleasures and pursuits of this world. The British historian Paul Johnson makes this point in his book *The History of the Jews*. The Jewish people fared much better under hardship and without a land or a state. He writes, "In self government and prosperity, the Jews always seemed drawn to neighboring religions...Only in adversity did they cling resolutely to their principles."

When the Jewish people were dislocated in exile or even dwelling in their own land but still under foreign governance, they remained truer to their faith. The Jewish people clung to and preserved their identity, distinctive way of life and faith by practicing the rhythm of the Jewish festivals. It is interesting to note that the meaning of the name Haggai is "festal". They knew how to celebrate. We read in Ezra that it was during this period that the people recommitted themselves to the public practices and structure of their faith. They defined the meaning of time by the reconnecting to the religious rhythms of the year. They renewed the practice of celebrating the Passover, which commemorates the founding of the Jewish nation; fifty days later came Pentecost, which reminded them of the giving of the law; the Feast of the Tabernacles, recalled their wilderness wanderings; Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, was the solemn day of self examination as they confessed their need for a substitutionary sacrifice for their sin. This was all done to preserve a distinctive way of life.

It has been said that the Jewish people are the most ancient people who have survived without land in the *diaspora* (dispersion) because of one thing: Sabbath keeping. It takes tradition, practices, ritual and liturgy to continuously to sustain an identity.



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The time in which we live for the Christian Church has been compared to the period of dislocation like the time of the Babylonian Captivity. Over the last generation, the influence of the church has been marginalized in the post-Christian era. We have experienced our own displacement. In many ways, like the Jews in Babylon, we may feel like strangers in a strange land. To echo Psalm 137, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"

To sustain our identity and renewal we need to practice the rhythms of the faith. These rhythms are the corporate and personal spiritual disciplines. We need to define who we are by the touchstones in our routines. In our worship life the structure of the Christian year becomes all the more enriching in a time when our culture does not support it as it has in the past. The high points of the Christian year bring meaning to time. Throughout the year we celebrate the *kairos* moments of the Lord's divine intervention. Advent is the four week period of waiting for the Messiah and Christ child to come into the world. Christmas says, "God is with us." Lent is a six week period of self-examination that leads us into Holy Week where we follow Jesus through the vale of tears up to Golgotha and into the darkness of the tomb and then into the glorious light of the resurrection. We need the structure of corporate disciplines of worship to bring stability and order to our hearts.

This is matched with the daily personal disciplines of prayer, reflective bible reading, and bible memorization, so that we are placing our minds on that which will provide the internal order to our inner being.

Spiritual disciplines provide structure for our souls. I said earlier that left to ourselves we are like a garden that goes to seed. On the other hand, the spiritual disciplines are the way to tend to the soil of our lives. I see spiritual disciplines like the farmer who prepares the soil for the planting of the seeds. In order for the seed to take root and multiply into a harvest, you must cut furrows into the soil. The soil must be turned over for the seed to be nourished. The spiritual disciplines open the soil of our lives to the implanting of the seed of God's word. They keep putting us into the presence of God. Richard Foster captures the purpose of the disciplines like this, "The disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where He can work within us."

Here is the path we have followed this morning:

Return: Follow the deep longings that God places in our hearts.

Restoration: The Lord meets the desires of our hearts in abundance.



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Renewal: We are sustained by the practices that keep us in God's presence.

May it be said that we are a people who grow forward, and it doesn't take a boulder of pain to get our attention. Then we can embrace the promise, **"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."**