THE STORY CHAPTER 19

The Return Home

February 18-19, 2017

Appearing on the Big Screen…

1. **God will make a way.**

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

2 “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. 3 Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. 4 And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”

*Pg. 263; Ezra 1:1-4*

1. **Things need to be different.**

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

*Pg. 264; Ezra 3:3*

1. **Stay alert to the enemy’s schemes.**

“…You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”

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**5**Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **6**You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”

**7**This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **8**Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord. **9**“You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the Lord Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. **10**Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. **11**I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

*Pgs. 266-267; Haggai 1:3-9*

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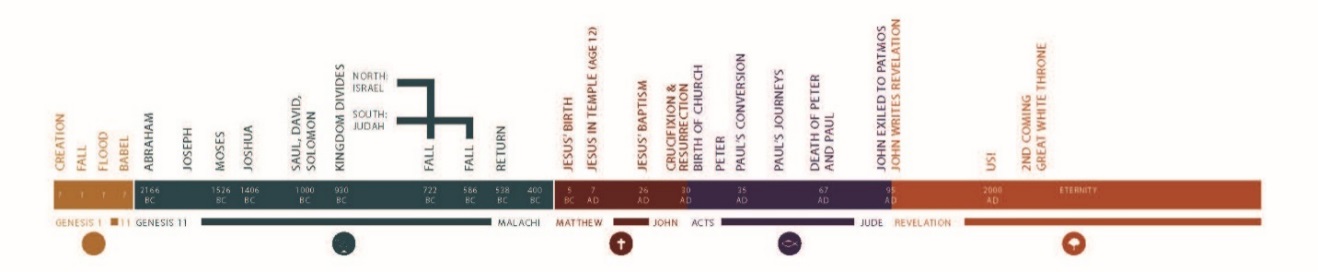
Oak Hills Church, San Antonio, TX

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**To view The Story Chapter 19 sermon video,** [**CLICK HERE**](http://media.oakhillschurch.com/default.aspx?page=3679&item=571)

Today’s chapter in *The Story* is all about coming home.

*Refer to the Timeline poster.*

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The southern kingdom of Judah has been in exile for 70 years. This all came about at the hands of God’s loving discipline. You see, of the 12 tribes of Israel, they are the one God chose to bring us the Messiah – Jesus Christ. But they failed to accurately represent God to the other nations. If God continued to bless them as they did evil and flirted with the worship of other gods, it would send a confusing message about the nature and plan of the one true God in providing the way for all of us, not just the Jews, to get back with God in the garden.

The 70 years are up and it is time for them to come home – to Jerusalem. There are 4 lessons we can learn today about coming back home. Maybe you or someone you know, has drifted away from God, is estranged from family, or has made some poor choices and you or that friend, finds that your lives are not working and you want to come home. This message provides the roadmap back.

1. **God will make a way.**

If your heart is truly in the right place, God will make a way when there seems to be no way.

God did this for Judah. Look at the opening words in chapter 19 of The Story or the first verses of the Old Testament book of Ezra –

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

**2**“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. **3**Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. **4**And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”

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God intervened from the Upper Story to open the door for their return. He turned the heart of a pagan king, the most power man in the world at the time, towards Judah. He can do the same for you. Some of you who have lived the life of a prodigal and have come back home, almost always recount an incident outside of your control that paved the way for your return. For those of you still living the life of a prodigal and you are thinking there is no way back, there is. It comes from God’s intervention from the Upper Story into your Lower Story.

But, there is something else we need to know before we venture back.

1. **Things need to be different.**

When you return back to God, or your family, or sobriety, things can’t be the same.

Let me point out two major changes in the way Judah is acting now versus before the discipline.

* They didn’t reinstate a king.

*Refer to Timeline poster.*

If you recall, God didn’t want Israel to appoint a human king. He wanted to lead them directly. But they wanted to be like the other nations and God allowed it. And, as suspected, these kings led them away from God. Now that they are back, their attitude is “been there, done that”. The next king to sit on the throne of David will be Jesus – who is God wrapped in flesh.

* For those of you who read the chapter this week, did you catch the very first thing they did when their feet hit Jerusalem’s soil?

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

*Pg.264; Ezra 3:3*

They built an altar to God. What are they doing? They are putting God first in their life. When you return back home to God, this time he can’t take second place. You get yourself to church each week, no excuses. You open up his Word. You bring your decisions and requests to God in prayer for direction and grace. You say grace at the table whether you’re sitting by yourself or with family and friends. You say “yes” to God’s will without hesitation or compromise.

You cannot do the things you used to do. You cannot hang with the people you used to hang with. Things have to be different.

1. **Stay alert to the enemy’s schemes.**

Here is a fact of life – there will always be someone who doesn’t want you to recover, to get better, to succeed and you will need to be aware of their schemes to bring you down.

For Judah, their primary enemy was the surrounding nations who remembered when Israel was an unstoppable force in the world. This move to “Make Judah Great Again” isn’t making the other nations happy.

Their first scheme was to “infiltrate.” They offered to join up with Judah to help them build the temple around the altar to God. But Zerubbabel, the leader sniffed out their schemes and made this reply –

“…You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”

*Pg. 265; Ezra 4:3*

But the enemy didn’t stop there. They had many more tricks up their sleeves. They used discouragement, fear, bribery and even powered up on the broken people of Judah. And guess what? It worked. They stopped working on the temple and it laid dormant for 10 years. What did they do instead? They turned their attention to building their own homes and their own lives. This is the single greatest mistake of the follower of God – they simply switched their priorities. “Me first and God second.” As we say in Texas, “That dog won’t hunt.”

And guess what happens? Their lives stopped working. They lost that sense of momentum. One day they have the most powerful king in the world opening up his pocketbook to fund the entire project and to protect them from enemies and now…nothing. Someone turned off the spigot of blessing. Their lives are in a recession. They are stuck. Which leads to the final point –

1. **Remain open to correction.**

God sent two prophets to them to confront them and get them back on track. God’s discipline of his people is never to tear them down, but help them get back on track.

Do you remember the last time you got a spanking? I do. I was 16 years old. I had a friend ask me to spend the night, and I knew if I called my mother, she would say no, so I didn’t call her. I just spent the night at my friend’s house. I came back the next morning, and apparently, my mother had been out all night trying to find me, and she was worried sick. She spotted a bit of a haughty attitude in me, and she said, “Randy, you’re not too old to be spanked.” I gave her a little more attitude. I said, “Mom, I’m a young man, and you only stand this high to me. You wouldn’t dare spank me.” She went and got my father’s black leather belt and came back into my room. I saw her coming and thought, “This woman’s actually going to spank me!” I put my hands back to protect my rear end, and she said, “Randall, you’d better remove your hands or they’re going to be hit!” and I didn’t, so the first swat hit my hands and it stung! So I moved them, and the next 4 swats made contact with my behind. That spanking from my mother did not physically injure me. What she did was she sent me a message: “Son, if you don’t learn how to receive correction, you’re not going to make it.”

You know what? I think some of you need a good spanking. God sent the prophet Haggai to Judah to confront them:

**3**Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: **4**“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

**5**Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **6**You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”

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*Pgs. 266-267; Haggai 1:3-9*

The same God who intervenes from the Upper Story to make the way back home, is the same God who intervenes into their Lower Story to frustrate them, to stop them in their tracks, to shift the momentum, for the purpose of getting their attention and moving them back in the right direction.

Here is an observation from 28 years of being a minister – it is true of my life and the lives of people I seek to lead spiritually – most of us are not open to correction. We are not teachable; we don’t like to be confronted. When a marriage is deteriorating or an addiction is being formed or a negative behavior is becoming a pattern and a loving friend or family member tries to confront it, most people won’t listen.

If you want to be a winner in life, you have to find a way to humble yourself and take tough news to heart.

Now, for the record, I hate to be corrected. But, over the years, I have seen this inability to be teachable be the downfall of many, many people. So, I have made it an intentional goal to become a person open to correction. Fortunately for me, I haven’t made any mistakes in the last twenty years, so I haven’t need to be corrected. (Oh, I meant the last 20 minutes, not 20 years.)

The first thing I do when confrontation comes my way is take about ten deep breaths.

The second thing I do is to consider the source. If it is coming from a person who has proven to not be for me, I shut them down and do not give them the satisfaction of a positive response. They are almost always in it to tear you down or get something for themselves. Once I shut them down, I take the core of their criticism into my prayer closet and I ask God to reveal to me the kernel of truth that I can learn from that will make me a better person. Often God will tell me that what an enemy has said to me is a lie, and I should not own it or let it defeat me.

If, on the other hand, when a person who has walked with me and is for me and loves God confronts me, then I listen. I don’t like it, but I listen. I don’t automatically think they are right in what they are saying, but I listen and thank them. Confronting someone you love, is one of the hardest things to do.

A number of years ago, when I was 39, I was giving a similar message, and I explained that often when we receive criticism it comes from a member of the opposite sex, such as your wife. But women communicate differently than men, so over the years, whenever my wife has tried to confront me, I could never make out what she was saying. So I said in this sermon, “I have given my wife permission if she can’t get through to me to go to 3 men who love me, and then they will come to me with what she’s trying to tell me.” I was never thinking this would ever come back to haunt me – it was just a sermon illustration!

It wasn’t many days later, it came back to haunt me. At the age of 39 I had picked up the game of golf. I had never golfed prior to that, but I picked up the game, and I got hooked, right at the time in my life when we had 4 small children at home. I was playing a lot. I had been gone for a week, speaking to people, and as the plane landed back at home, I thought, “If I hurry, I can get out to the course and play 9 holes before the sun goes down, and I’ll see my family later.” And that’s what I did.

The next morning, these 3 men show up at my door. They sat me down and said, “Randy, you’re golfing too much.” My first response was, “That is funny! Because most of the time I’m golfing with you guys!” They said, “Randy, you’re golfing too much.” I said, “You want to talk to me about golf! Hey I know your sins better than my own, and your sins are worse than golfing.” “Randy, you’re golfing too much.”

I remember in that moment, I decided to own it, and I went to my wife, and we worked out a plan that enabled me to golf, but not in a way that undermined my family. Because of loving confrontation of those men, I believe I escaped what would have been the destruction of my legacy, and today I enjoy a relationship with my grandchildren, my children and my wife of 35 years. Praise God for friends who will tell me the truth.

Back to Judah. When Haggai and Zechariah delivered the news to them, they did the most unexpected thing – they listened! The work on the temple resumed and was completed, and once again they experienced the wind of God’s blessings at their backs.

**Conclusion**

Prayer for people who need to return home:

1. Those who need to come back home.
2. Those who have returned but are struggling
3. Those who have someone they love who needs to come back home