

The Story: Homecoming
By Jason Huff
Psalm 85, 2 Peter 2:1-10, Ezra 3:1-8,10-13

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Ezra 3:1-8 and 10-13. Listen now to God's Word. "When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem. Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. 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. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred feasts of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD. On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.

Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia. In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work, appointing Levites twenty years of age and older to supervise the building of the house of the LORD. Jeshua and his sons and brothers and Kadmiel and his sons (descendants of Hodaviah) and the sons of Henadad and their sons and brothers -- all Levites -- joined together in supervising those working on the house of God.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever." 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 this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away."

I need to say to whoever has been praying for God to give me sermon illustrations, please STOP! As most of you know, my family was involved in an accident on I-94 Sunday afternoon out by Jackson, MI. My son had wanted to see the town that had been named after him, but this was not the way to do it! Thankfully, Catha and the boys had only bumps and bruises, and my injury could have been worse. But besides the pain and the lost mini-vacation, the worst thing was being in exile. With only one cab in the entire city that could transport me, we were holed up at the local Holiday Inn from Sunday to Tuesday. For two days, everything was uncertain. We didn't have our luggage or our insurance info – it was all in the totaled car. We had nothing but the clothes on our backs and a couple items we grabbed. We had no idea when we would get home or how I'd get home with a leg that can't bend. It was almost as scary as the wreck itself.

Realistically, our situation wasn't that bad...yet for those two days, we were in a state of controlled chaos. So when our rescuers finally showed up and the insurance people got things rolling, it was an immense relief. Things didn't immediately return to normal, and with my injury, they won't for quite a long time. But at least we were home. At least we were able to sleep in our beds; we were among familiar people and surroundings. It sure isn't perfect, but when you know your entire world could have caved in, it changes your perspective on things.

That's much the same place the Jews were in as we reach chapter 19 in *The Story* this week. Two weeks ago, we saw the people of the southern kingdom of Judah sent into exile in Babylon as Jerusalem and the temple were laid waste. Last week, we saw how the faith of Daniel and his friends brought them through their trials in exile. This week, many of Judah's citizens get to head back home.

As was common in that era, one great kingdom would rise up only to fall to the next great kingdom. Babylon's control of the middle east collapsed under the weight of the Persian empire, which came to power in 539 B.C. King Cyrus issued a decree shortly after conquering Babylon that the Jewish people were to return to Jerusalem in order to build Yahweh's temple. Stunningly enough, Cyrus saw Yahweh's hand behind his victory and wanted to honor him. So a chunk of those in exile head back to Jerusalem with gifts from the Babylonians with which to re-build the temple. After seven months of travel and enough time to build settlements, they came together in Jerusalem. They rebuilt the altar and made the first proper sacrifices to Yahweh in over a generation. We're told that there were both tears and shouts – tears that the foundation of the new temple was so much smaller than the first, but shouts that the true worship of Yahweh was once again a reality.

There was just one problem in getting any further...their old enemies were still around every corner. At first, they offered to help the Jews rebuild the temple, claiming that they had sacrificed to Yahweh ever since they had been sent into the land by the Assyrians. The Jewish people wanted them to have no part in it, though; after several decades in exile, they were not going to dishonor Yahweh by having their enemies – pagans who still worshiped multiple gods – build God's temple. In reply, the surrounding peoples do everything they can to thwart the rebuild. And so for over a decade, the temple project lays dormant. The remnant that returned home built a life for themselves without the temple.

God was not pleased with their choice, so He challenged their hearts through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. God told them that the reason they had so many difficulties was because they had left His house a ruin. God called them to continue their work on the temple. They need not fear; He would have their backs during its construction. The prophets encouraged them with God's promises that while the new temple might not look as spectacular as the old one, He would fill it with His glory, that people from every nation would come to seek Him there. The fortunes of Jerusalem and Judah would be restored in God's plan and God's timing. And once they got the message, they did exactly what God had asked. We're told that the people genuinely had reverence and fear for the LORD.

When the reconstruction begins in earnest, there's more opposition, this time from Tattanaï, the governor of the Trans-Euphrates region. He writes the current king of Persia, Darius – the king who threw Daniel in a pit of lions last week – and asks why the Jews had been allowed to rebuild the temple. Darius has the records searched and finds Cyrus' decree. Then he tells Tattanaï not only not to hinder the construction, but that Trans-Euphrates is to pay the expenses of finishing the temple and continuing the sacrifices to Yahweh. Apparently, his incident with Daniel truly taught Darius to respect Yahweh. And seventy years after the final exile of the Jews into Babylon, the temple was finished.

The return from exile was a pivotal moment in Jewish history. It's hard to stress how this event shaped the thinking of Judah from here on out. And while there are many points we could stress, in my study this week I saw three ideas that stood out. The first is that *God is a promise keeper in the toughest situations*. Second, *God expects His people to make a home for Him*. Finally, we see that *setbacks and challenges are not necessarily God's way of saying no but may be the pathway to greater blessings*.

Let's start by understanding God's promise keeping in tough situations. A hundred years before the exile, God told the people they would be sent away for their continued infidelity to Him. But God also promised a remnant would return to Judah, that He would restore His people. This is exactly what happened. This might not sound like much, but it was unheard of for a captive people to be sent home to build a temple to their god. As we heard last week, the goal of the Babylonians was total assimilation of the exiles. Yet they were overtaken by the Persians, a short-lived empire whose victory over Babylon was nothing short of amazing itself. God's hand was in world events to bring Cyrus of Persia to power, who released the Jews and funded the building of the temple.

God's promises weren't just to bring the Jews back from exile. He promised He would eventually send a messiah to save His people. The exiles expected a warrior messiah who would overthrow their enemies. Instead, the messiah came 500 years after the exile...and when He came, He wasn't a warrior but a teacher who taught that God wanted to save His people from their chief enemy – not the surrounding nations but the sin that kept them from relationship with God. We'll see Jesus' arrival in a few short chapters, but it's more proof that God keeps even the most difficult promises.

The fact that God always keeps His promises to us is far bigger than we may give God credit for. In reality, our world is full of broken promises. I like the new governor of Michigan, but many worry about the cuts and taxes he is budgeting. Promises about pensions and retirement turn out to be less than binding. And while politicians are masters of forgotten promises, it extends into all areas of life. During our exile in Jackson, I saw plenty of infomercials with blenders that would blend a tin can...CDs from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame presentations guaranteed to be the greatest concert of the decade...the perfect toys and games sold for only \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. If you need legal help, well then, William Shatner is certain to help you. We laugh at these ads because we know they don't hold up.

That's why God's promises are so important. He doesn't work the way the world does. When He makes a promise, He keeps it. We worry about the next job, the next paycheck or the next pension check, or even the next meal. But God says that He is the one in charge of the welfare of believers. A lot of people have told me that they hope that they might be saved, but they just aren't sure. Some people misunderstand redemption; they think they have to earn it, when in reality it's given to us as a free gift when we repent of our sin and believe in Jesus Christ for our salvation. But others worry because they don't know if God will follow through on His promises. They've had heartbreak and disappointments and they wonder if God is going to come through, or if they're pinning their hopes and dreams on a god who won't deliver.

It's through God's work in history that we can know we can trust his promises. If He saved His people from the Egyptians, if He delivered them out of the hands of ancient enemies like the Philistines, if He could punish them for a short time in Babylon and then lead them back home, if He gave them (and us) a messiah, then God has shown Himself faithful. Even in the last few generations, we've seen the Jewish people return to their homeland after the tragedy of WWII. God is at work. We can have confidence in Him. Even in our darkest days, God comes through. It's the reason I can't worry too much about my knee. God will come through. I've prayed that through the healing of this knee, God would be glorified. I'm looking forward to seeing how He will do it.

The next point I saw: *God expects to have a home with His people.* While the remnant that returned to Jerusalem fixed the altar and began making the proper sacrifices, they feared their enemies would attack. When troubles came, they stopped the temple project. They said, "It's not time yet for the temple to be rebuilt." But God said, "You've got paneled houses while mine lies in ruins." Their difficulties were related to their neglect of God's home. It takes a couple of prophets to challenge them before they gather their courage enough to continue building the temple. The structure they complete isn't as glorious as the first, but it lasts for nearly 600 years – the first one stood for less than 400.

Why is it such a big deal for God to have a temple? If we look back in Israel's history, God didn't have a temple for a very long time. When David became concerned because God had only a tabernacle and he had a whole palace, God blessed him for the thought, but God was in no rush. Solomon wrote how God's self could never be contained in a temple or tabernacle. So why does it become important now?

I believe God was showing His people that He wanted a place among them. He had not led them out of exile only for them to forget about Him like their forefathers did. The temple was as much for the people as it was for God. The new temple would serve as a reminder that God had brought His people back home. It would center them around His worship. The history of the nation tells us that the northern kingdom never followed God – and they had no access to the temple. The southern kingdom had bad kings and made terrible mistakes, but they also had fantastic kings like Hezekiah and Josiah. The temple helped them know who they were and reminded them that God was in their midst.

There hasn't been a temple in Jerusalem for 2000 years, yet God still wants a home with us today. God promised during the time of rebuilding that one day, He would no longer reside in a building but in the hearts of men and women. Jesus fulfilled this promise by giving believers the Holy Spirit, though Whom God dwells within everyone who trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

And so the question becomes for us: have we given our lives over to God that He might take up residence with us? God wasn't satisfied with just the foundation and the altar being built; He desired the whole temple. God isn't going to be satisfied with us giving Him an hour or two on Sunday mornings. God wants to have the whole place, your whole life, for Himself. Many Christians today want to call Jesus Savior because they like the idea that God saves us from sin. It's very different than calling Him Lord, however, and letting Him have His way with your heart and mind and soul. He can't be your Savior if He's not your Lord. So I challenge you today...determine to let God make a temple for Himself inside your heart. Let Him nurture it, and work with Him through prayer and Bible study and acts of discipleship. Ask Him to make your heart His home, and He will do it if you are willing.

I also challenge you to think this way: God isn't done building this home yet either. God wants more than just the sixty of us here worshiping Him. He wants us to fill this place to the rafters with people who at one time didn't know Him, people we've reached out to, who discover that even in their darkest, most sinful moments, God still loved them and sent Jesus to save them. We must not give up building this house of worship with new believers. Jesus came to seek and save the lost that they might know His love and worship Him and become His disciples. It's our responsibility to build this house too.

Here's the final piece of good news from this part of Scripture: *setbacks and challenges are not necessarily God's way of saying no but may be the pathway to greater blessings*. Just as the remnant began rebuilding the temple in earnest, we have this mess with Tattanaï. He's determined to see construction stop. When he learns that the Jews had been commanded by Cyrus to undertake the project, he isn't satisfied. He goes all the way to the top, to King Darius, in order to have the whole thing halted. But when they search the archives and find Cyrus' decree, Darius adds to it, and makes Tattanaï's region help pay for the temple! What looked like a disaster in the making turned out to be a blessing for God's people.

It's really difficult for us to judge what God has in mind when there are roadblocks in our way. Some people have said that our accident was God's way of telling me to slow down. The problem is, we were on our way to a mini-vacation – slowing down was what we were on the way to do! Others have made suggestions as to what to do, sometimes contradicting my doctors and one another. We all want to figure out why these things happen and what to do about them. What does it mean for the pastor to have a broken kneecap? Is this a sign that God's trying to tell us something?

I'd say no. I know these things...we're going to have to work together to make things happen over the next few months, and that's already started. As a church, you'll likely have to have extended patience with me as I work a lot more from home, and you may attend a meeting or two at our house. Just like the building of the second temple took a long and difficult road, I expect the next six months will be a difficult road of recovery for myself and my family and, indirectly, the church. There will be some things you may have to do because I won't be able to. But I believe that we all may come out of this far stronger than we once were. God has already brought this band of believers through so much over the last fifteen years. Just last year, we had a roof that needed a \$30,000 replacement, and God overcame that obstacle through our giving. God has steered us through every challenge we've had. If we grow together as brothers and sisters in Christ, if we invite people in to see what God is doing in the midst of struggles and pain, if we determine to build God's church despite the difficulties, I believe God will see us through it and bless us as we move forward in faith with Him. Don't get discouraged and don't be afraid – God will even use the setbacks to accomplish His purposes in His timing.

The return of God's people from exile back to their homeland is an astounding story, one that shows us God's immense love for those He has chosen...and for us, whom He has chosen to be His children even today. Let us remember to build Him a home in our hearts, to hold tight to His promises, and to see obstacles to His work as challenges that will ultimately draw us closer to Him. As we believe in His Son Jesus for salvation, He will bring us into our eternal home.