

Chapter 19: You CAN Go Home Again, But...

1. You **can** go home again, but remember to _____.
Good things can become the worst enemy of the _____.

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 3:8-12

2. You **can** go home again, but there will always be _____.
Eight times the word from God through his prophets was: _____.

Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

Malachi 3:10-11

3. You **can** go home again, but you'll have to adjust your _____.

And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him... So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him, you trust him...

1 Peter 1:5-8

The big question is this:

Will you **choose** to keep your head above the clouds and pray to see the _____?

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had a homecoming that fell short of your expectations?
2. Does Jesus dwell more tangibly in your temple today vs. years ago?
3. What does "putting first things first" look like for **you** right now, today?

Teaching Script

Well today, we find ourselves in Chapter 19 of *The Story—The Return Home*. Have you been to any homecomings lately? Last year, I had two homecomings. One was my 30th college reunion in October. I attended a small Christian college in the Midwest with about 300 students total. Most of the people I ran around with weren't there, so I had a weekend to sit and soak, to let the memories wander back as I roamed the campus.

It wasn't easy to go home again. I found out why two of my good friends hadn't returned in a long time—they had both adopted a gay lifestyle, one of them after a difficult marriage and divorce. I also didn't see the teacher that molested me—I had confronted him several years ago when our book was published and forgiven him then; but it would have been an awkward conversation if he'd been there.

Perhaps what troubled me the most was a conversation I did have with a friend who I knew from youth camp even before college. Thirty years ago he was pretty wild. He raised nine kids, slept with more girls than I could count, and bragged about each conquest. But as I talked to him at the reunion, he had changed. He was now what you might call “old school”—it was clear that he had become very legalistic—a man who believed without a doubt that members of his denomination were the only true Christians, and that the only way you could go to heaven was strict conformity to his church's interpretation of the Scriptures. This was his goal in life, he said, to live up to his church's teachings. It struck me as very ironic that the man who needed so much grace as a teenager, was now completely unwilling to give it as an adult.

Sometimes it's not easy to go home again. 2,500 years ago, God's people had been taken captive by the empires that controlled the ancient world - the Assyrians to the north and Babylon to the east. Now, two generations of captivity had elapsed. And as always happens, kingdoms rise and fall; world empires come and go.

Persia, who conquered Babylon, was more benevolent than their predecessors. So King Cyrus issued a decree to repatriate all aliens back to their homelands while allowing them some degree of self-rule. Here is the first sign in Chapter 19 of God's great Upper Story—redeeming His promise to provide a way for His people to return home.

Under Zerubbabel, the new governor, nearly 50,000 Jews returned home to Jerusalem. Their city was devastated but still beloved. While there was a lot of work to do, the temple was the first priority, and the altar within the temple was at the very top of the list. This was because it was only when they rebuilt the altar and the surrounding temple that sacrifices could be offered in accordance with the Law of Moses. For over fifty years, God's people had not been able to worship as God had instructed. There was a bit of disappointment because this temple wouldn't compare to the magnificence of the one Solomon built, but the process had begun, and with the foundation and altar laid, true worship of God was again a reality.

But then came a problem: the builders encountered political resistance from the locals. This drained their enthusiasm and they lost their focus. The outcome: for almost 16 years, the project stalled. But the problem was, this wasn't just *any* building. It was the center of their worship. It had been the dwelling place of the visible presence of God. It was the only allowable location for their sacrifices and sacred feasts.

This leads us to the first of three problems the Jews encountered, and that's this:

1. **You *can* go home again, but remember to *keep first things first*.**

After these sixteen years of delay, the prophet Haggai spoke on God's behalf. Let's read from pages 266 and 267 of *The Story*...

Twice Haggai said, "Give careful thought to your ways." Why? Because the stalled temple work was a problem of misplaced priorities. It wasn't due to a shortage of engineers or bricks—when you boiled it all down, the delay in rebuilding the temple was outward evidence of an inward problem.

The issue was that their own pleasure and comfort had taken precedence over pleasing God. Haggai rebuked them for living in the paneled houses while God's house remained in ruins. Preparing adequate shelter for their families was certainly an understandable need, but they had gone far beyond "need"—so God began to withhold His blessings. They were experiencing drought, poor harvest, and slow reproduction because of their misplaced priorities.

The key is this: a priority is done first. It is the most urgent or most critical for success. It is the driving force of our thinking and our actions. It is not the same as a response to immediate demands around us. We confuse the "tyranny of the urgent" with what is most important.

How often does the tyranny of the urgent ever overtake your priorities? How many of us have had great intentions to spend more time in prayer, or carve just 5 minutes out of our day for a quiet time of reflection, only to be assaulted with fires that have to be put out before we even get to the office? In the same way, the Jews' problem was a common one. There were so many other pressing needs that the people were distracted. Their fields were overgrown from years of disuse; their roads, buildings, and houses needed repairs. Their original priority of worshiping God in a rebuilt temple quickly took a backseat to the struggles of daily life. This leads us to a key principle that's next on your outline:

Good things can become the worst enemy of the *best things*.

I am so proud of you guys. I've always seen this gathering as a tool to move men beyond "good enough." Some begin strong by building the foundation and their altars, but then become comfortable—content in their faith—cozy in their Christianity.

We must not grow as complacent as this first wave of Jews, commissioned to put first things first and rebuild the vehicle of worship before anything else.

We must not be like those who couldn't get warm, who couldn't be filled, whose resources dried up, because they lost sight of what came first.

Listen to the prophet Malachi, who came after Haggai:

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

'In tithes and offerings.' You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi 3:8-12

This isn't a sermon on giving, but it just stands to reason: if we're going to put first things first, we have to put our money where our mouth is. I got a call from an Oak Hills family where the

mom and dad both lost their jobs and wanted to know if a 10% tithe was still a requirement. I really applaud them, even in the midst of double unemployment, to still somehow honor God financially despite their hardship. I know people who have faithfully tithed from their unemployment checks of \$300 a week. Will a man rob God? The same God who feeds the sparrows? I don't think so—let's resolve today to always put first things first.

The second problem:

2. You can go home again, but there will always be *opposition*.

The Samaritans of the area were none too thrilled about re-establishing the Jewish state in Palestine. None of the locals went to any trouble rolling out the welcome wagon. For one thing, Judea was a completely different place than it was two generations ago. The balance of political power had shifted and could shift back dramatically with a rebuilt and re-energized Jerusalem. So they tried a backhanded offer of help as an attempt to *sabotage* the temple project. While Zerubbabel didn't fall for their scheme, the threats and bribes were enough to stop work on the temple.

But notice God's message during this time of frustration and discouragement. Turn to page 267 in *The Story*...

Eight times, on pages 267-268, the word from God through his prophets was:

"Be strong."

"Do not fear."

"Let your hands be strong."

"Do not be afraid."

It WILL take intentionality and perseverance, but God promised that if you get your priorities in order, finish My temple, and stand fast against the naysayers, "the seed will grow, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew." What will it take for Me to bless you? Put first things first, and when it comes to your antagonists, just trust Me. What was it that Malachi said?

Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

Malachi 3:10-11

But it wasn't over by a long shot. After Haggai called them back to task and got the project going again, sure enough, more opposition sprang up. After the building resumed, a new antagonist, Tattenai, wrote to King Darius, asking just who exactly authorized these guys to come home in the first place? Darius searched the royal archives and discovered that his predecessor, King Cyrus, had in fact given the royal thumbs up to the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

God's sense of humor is on grand display here, because what happened next was King Darius sent a letter back to Tattenai, the troublemaker, and told him to fully fund the temple reconstruction out of his own coffers. The plot had backfired and in 516 B.C. the temple was completed. And as we'll see next week in the story of Esther, this won't be the last time we'll see that with God, what goes around comes around, and indeed, divine paybacks are hell.

But there's one more issue with homecomings:

3. You can go home again, but you'll have to adjust your *expectations*.

Last October, I saw York College differently than I did 30 years ago. But my *other* homecoming last year was in July, to Wisconsin. I took my mom to Milwaukee to celebrate the 50th

anniversary of the dedication of the Southside Church of Christ. The building looked exactly like I remembered it, inside and out. The people I remembered from my childhood were older and grayer, but the podium from which my dad led the singing was still there. The same wooden communion trays were still there.

When we drove by our old house, it seemed so much smaller than when I lived there. The vacant lot behind the house where we played was gone. My perception 40 years ago was very different.

The returning Jews also had to shift their expectations. Look at the bottom of page 267...

They must have experienced a wide range of bittersweet emotions as they arrived home to find overgrown fields, neglected roads, demolished homes, and a destroyed temple. The precious hope of a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey was a distant memory. Everywhere they looked they could see evidence of the Divine judgment brought on by their disobedient forefathers. For a few survivors, the Babylonian siege, the famine, disease, and death must have flashed before their eyes daily.

Yes, they had to readjust their expectations. But look now at the first full paragraph on page 268...

What could this mean? So many people become discouraged because as they remodel their lives, it's different the second time around. We look back wistfully on what used to be, in the past, like my college experience, and we can almost taste that bitter sweetness: there's both a nostalgic familiarity, along side a stark realization that things will never be the same. The Jews had to come to grips with this: some wept because this rebuilt temple couldn't hold a candle to Solomon's, but God said don't worry about nostalgia—this temple will be greater than the former. How? Because 500 years later, Jesus Himself would visit this temple. That's what God meant when He said, "I will fill this house with glory." It was a prophecy of the coming Messiah whose presence will sanctify this temple far more than all of Solomon's silver and gold.

What's our takeaway? Some of you had a first love—a journey to Christ early in your life, a temple built in you at a young age. But, as you grew older, that temple fell into decay because of your choices, like Israel. And now many of you have come back—Jesus rebuilt both the temple that lies within you and your faith, as you returned to God. I'm here to tell you today that those voices of guilt and shame from the past can be silenced. Why? Because the second temple in you is greater than the first. How? Because today, with all you've been through, in all the ways you've been tested, even with all your failures, I believe Jesus is more present in you today than at the beginning.

Listen to Peter:

And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him... So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him, you trust him...

1 Peter 1:5-8

Yes, you can go home again.

Just one more observation before we close. The question of balance remains. How do we keep from getting caught up in the Lower Story—putting bread on the table, making a marriage work, worrying about our kids? How do we put first things first?

It would be nice if the Bible gave us a list or an order of priorities so that we could follow a cookbook plan—a neat, tidy recipe for discipleship. But it does not. It gives us principles that we have to apply individually. It is easy to become too legalistic, like my friend from college—follow this strict set of rules and you'll be ok. But of course it's not that easy. How do we prioritize our lives? As the seasons in our lives change, the outworking of our priorities may look different, but the core principles must remain aligned to the will of God.

Some people have suggested that our checkbooks and our calendars reveal our true priorities; yes, but this isn't always the case. For example, the man who works two jobs or long hours could either be providing for the needs of his family so that his wife can be a stay-home mom or he could be avoiding his wife and children, driven by greed for material wealth. Nevertheless, the principle is still a good one: a man's checkbook and his calendar usually provide a clear window into who reigns supreme in his life.

Yes, circumstances and life changes affect our priorities. The addition of a newborn baby or sending a child to college changes the way our checkbooks and calendars look. The chronic illness or death of a loved one changes them just as much. Life happens and things are constantly fluid. Don't worry—every believer struggles to balance the Upper Story priorities with the Lower Story of our daily lives.

It's true: good things can become the worst enemy of the best things. The Israelites' personal wants superseded the best thing—doing the will of God.

Every day, we juggle our daily Lower Story responsibilities with the Upper Story priorities of serving and honoring God, don't we? So what's the right thing? What do we do? Most of all, we pray. Since the seasons change, and our financial and time disbursements with it, true discipleship and putting first things first will by necessity shift as well. The big question is this:

Will you look beyond the daily rat race, the lost job, the lost promotion, the disagreement with your wife... **Will you choose to keep your head above the clouds and pray to see the Upper Story** of what God is doing in your life?

It won't be easy—everyone gets lost in the Lower Story, the details, the daily distractions, just like those who rebuilt the temple. But when we put first things first, the priority isn't building bigger barns, it's making sure we lead our families spiritually by praying for them and with them, helping them see how much God loves them, and building temples in their hearts dedicated to Christ.

There will be opposition from our common enemy. And in the Bible, long and painful seasons of discipline brought much needed change to the hearts of God's people. God's discipline in our lives is a constant and poignant reminder that this world is not our home. God's great Upper Story is that just as you and I have already been delivered from the bondage to sin by Jesus, one day, one day, you and I will go home, to our real home, delivered from even the presence of sin and death, to the land of eternal promise, where all things will be made new, and home will be forever.