We’ve come to the end of this series and our train ride through the Old Testament. We’ve stopped on key words at significant places. There’s much more to see, but we are soon to enter the season of Lent. (This train has got to get over to Jesus!)

Last week the word was Babylon. The question was “How do you live in a foreign land, and not forget who you are?” Today we stop on the word Temple. The exile is over! The Persians defeat the Babylonians, and they let Israel go home!

*In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: ‘Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.’*

They had been in exile for decades. Some say as many as 70 years! People died in exile. They never got out. Others were born in exile and didn’t want to leave. Babylon was home. Others went back, but things weren’t the same.

You don’t just walk back home after you have done something terrible and everything returns to normal. Things change. People change. It’s good news they got to go back, but that didn’t make it easy. Being restored is a wonderful thing, but it’s more of a journey than it is a destination.

*One of the hard tasks of going back was to rebuild the temple. It had been destroyed. Their most sacred space had been violated; stripped, burned, toppled, desecrated. It took 7 years for King Solomon to build it. It had been there for 476 years, six months and ten days before it was destroyed. (Somehow the historian Josephus knew that!). The temple was the center-piece of Jewish identity, of their faith and of their history.*
The temple is much more than a building, it’s a symbol, a statement. When it was destroyed, it reflected what was going on in the hearts of Israel. They were destroyed. When it was rebuilt, it was expression of the restoration of Israel.

At the dedication, 476 years before the exile, King Solomon included this in his prayer;

46“If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; 47yet if they come to their senses in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly’; 48if they repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies, who took them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name; 49then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, maintain their cause 50and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you; and grant them compassion in the sight of their captors, so that they may have compassion on them 51(for they are your people and heritage, which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron-smelter).” (1 Kings 8:46-51)

(And yes, that is one sentence, with 204 words in it! I counted.) It’s as if Solomon knew something, 476 years before it happened.

God is in the restoration business! How many times have we seen it? The Bible is full of restoration stories. Pick one; Abraham and Hagar, Moses was a murderer, David and Bathsheba, Israel had a cycle of apostasy, Christ is raised from the dead. That’s all restoration!

The woman caught in the act of adultery is not stoned to death. The elders are not without sin, and so they drop their stones. But it says in Leviticus, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.” (Lev. 20:10). It’s right there in the Bible! But Jesus forgives her. She is restored.

Peter denied Jesus three times. “I don’t know the guy!” That’s what he said. He had to live with those words through the entire crucifixion. Can you imagine knowing you denied him, as he hung there and suffocated to death? And then what did Jesus do? After the resurrection, he asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” And Peter answered three times, “Yes, Lord, you know I do.” He restored him! And Peter became the leader of the Church.

Saul is a Pharisee. Pharisees were founded during the return from exile. Their purpose was to restore Israel to the law. A little over 500 years later, Pharisees had
become self-righteous hypocrites, according to Jesus. They had become fanatics. Saul was a Christian-hating Pharisee.

So, what does God do? God restores him! God changes his name to Paul. “You are no longer that other person.” God takes a Pharisee, a guy who persecuted Christians, who approved of their imprisonment and even their killing, and used him to plant the very first churches, to chisel out the origins of Christian theology. Paul wrote the majority of the New Testament! That’s restoration.

If you take the Scriptures seriously, you come to the conclusion that **restoration is in the heart of God.**

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Even while they were in exile, God spoke words of restoration to Israel. Jeremiah prophesied;

> ’For surely I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord, ‘plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart. I will let you find me, says the Lord and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations, and all the places where I have driven you,’ says the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back into the place from which I sent you into exile.’ (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

There were other words of hope;

> ‘The days are surely coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah…I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another … for they shall all know me…for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.’ (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

That’s restoration!

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But is there a universal truth that travels over the span of time, from ancient Israel to us? We aren’t Israel. We haven’t been in exile. We don’t have a temple.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians; “Do you not know that **you** are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). That’s an incredible statement from a
former Pharisee! He’s not finished. “For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” (3:17b). Something’s changed. Something’s new.

This is core to understanding what it means to be a Christian. **Through Christ, the dwelling place of God is in us.**

Totally new concept. We can return from the exile of our sin, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to become temples of the Holy Spirit. That’s unheard of…unbelievable! Who among us is worthy to be a dwelling place of God? It may not be as unbelievable as it is undeserved.

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**Temple** is a powerful word when you read it in history. It’s an even more powerful word when you realize you are one!

If a building can be restored, so can a human life. It’s not easy, and it doesn’t happen overnight, but it’s still possible. It’s possible because of God’s restoring grace. We get to go home too! The exile is over. Our temples are rebuilt and we get our lives back in Christ! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Congregation; **Amen.**