



THE STORY



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Scripture: *The Story*-Chapter 19–Ezra-The Return Home

I will begin this message the same way that I think we almost begin every single message in this last series and if you've been here, you'll know exactly what I'm going to say. We are on a 31-week journey through all of Scripture, from the very first book Genesis to the last book Revelation. And we are excited about where this is taking us and what we are learning. We are on week 19 today, so if you are newer here, you can always catch up and go back. All the messages are online. You can watch them via video and see what we've been taken through. If you want to still buy *The Story* book we are reading through that is the Scripture, you can still pick those up. There are still some available at the Welcome Kiosk.

But I have to admit, when we began this whole journey, this series, I was excited and a little excited for myself. I thought there would be some things that I would have learned, maybe some nuances I had missed over the years as I've engaged the Bible myself personally. But, I was never prepared for the heart change that God wanted to work in me.

As I've kind of walked this thing through, certain things have changed in me. As I ponder this whole idea of how God has this beautiful upper story and I have my lower story, and am I really embracing what He has and am I choosing to connect my lower story to His upper story or am I continually muddling around in a lower story that can never be as amazing as when I choose to connect it up into God's amazing upper story. I've had to wrestle with that and look at my own life as to where am I and where am I not choosing the beauty of what God has. Do I really believe, in the depths of my soul, that there is this amazing upper story going on? Do I trust it? Or am I still skeptical that it really is a good story that I really want to connect to?

So in the last week, I've been looking at all the stories we've had to this point, the first 18 and I kind of started mapping them out as to what they were, what they looked like and I kind of put them on the whiteboard and I want to see what – maybe you've noticed this yourself, maybe not and I'm not sure whether you've come to the same conclusions or not – but I look at what's been going on in *The Story*.

It's been an amazing journey. Remember way back in September and you began in the Book of Genesis and God creates. And remember what it said? '*It was good. It was good.*' And it was beautiful. It was amazing. But soon after that – we're not sure exactly how long – something happened and we in the church call it *the fall* or sin entered the world or they ate from the tree they were not to, and it went from something beautiful and good and it went down to something that was never supposed to be. But God has a story and He so much wanted something better, and so eventually we read in Scripture that God calls a guy named Abram – eventually renamed as Abraham – He says '*I want to bless you. I want to make you into a great nation, not for yourselves but that you can now bless all nations. It's going to be something beautiful*', and the story seems to have this uptick, this pick up and Abram is there and he believes God. And his son Isaac and Jacob and Jacob has these twelve sons and eventually they go to Egypt. It's an amazing story with Joseph, if you recall, and it's starting to happen. It's going well.

But, the Egyptians forget who they are and they put them into slavery and the whole story takes this down turn and life is not that great and they are in bondage. Yet, interestingly, they grow into a massive nation while there.

Well, God hears their cries after about 400 years and the timing may not be the best timing from our perspective, always from God's perspective, and God raises up a guy named Moses. And Moses leads them out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea and they are going to go to the Promised Land and things are looking amazing. They are going to get there. God's doing amazing stuff.

But they don't trust God's story. They don't think it is the right story. They rebel already, even after all the stuff they saw and now they are forced to wander for forty years and it's not a great story anymore. An entire generation has to die away.

Well, after that time, God's promises stay true and He raises up a guy named Joshua, and Joshua leads them across the Jordan into the Promised Land, what God had always promised for them and it's looking good. Things are going well. But, after Joshua dies and all those around him die off, there's this season of just confusion and leadership and no one really wants to see God, and the whole thing drops down again. And it's not great.

Well, God still has a plan and He raises up the kings to lead them. And the first King Saul didn't do so well but David, possibly the most well-known king whether you are in church world or not is so well known, and David brings them to this point. David was a man after God's own heart, and the story is going to take a place. This is probably the pinnacle of the entire nation of Israel. It's a beautiful time. And things are going well. And his son Solomon takes over and things go well, for the most part, but Solomon doesn't end well. His sons take over and the whole thing splits and the kingdom is divided and things go back down again.

It's starting to look like my life. Does it look like yours, maybe? Well, God sends prophets. He sends them, 'come on, guys, like I have a plan for you, an amazing thing'. He sends them to remind them, to warn them, to say 'come on back because I've got a plan, a life, I want to bless you'. But they don't listen to the prophets. And so God sends them into seventy years of exile, and down it goes again.

And as I've thought about the story, this is their story, but in so many ways, this is my story. Maybe you see this as your story, the ups and the downs,

I'm going to follow God. Nah, I don't really believe Him. Is it good? Is it not?

I've learned some things about us as I've thought about this, about myself. First thing I've learned is that we continue, I continue to get distracted. Oh look, there's something – well, there's God – but no, that's something – and we just kind of lose sight, don't we? I've learned that we choose short-term excitement without long-term cost assessment. It feels good for the moment. It feels good for the week, the month, maybe the decade, but it's short-term in the light of eternity, yet I often don't think that way and I lose sight.

I found that we lose faith in God's plans. Right from the very beginning, the serpent said to Eve, '*Did God really say that? Is that the best plan?*' and Eve says 'ah, maybe not it's a great plan'. And we lose sight over and over again of what God has.

I found out that we need God-centered leaders as guides. Over and time again, God would bring a new God-honouring leader and raise an entire nation to go to a new place, and I realize I need people around me who can lead me, who seek God.

I've learned that we require spiritual rhythms to stay focused. That whenever they lost track they lost sight of the rhythms that God had established for them from the very beginning, things that were to be life-giving so they would not get distracted, they would stay focused.

I've also learned that there are those among us who model faith really well. In the midst of the story, there were those people that rose up. Even last week when Pastor Paul spoke, they were in exile. Life was not good, but who was there? Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego. They just still had faith. In the midst of the trial, in the midst of being thrown into a lion's den, you name it, they said 'I'll believe God. God's plan is the plan'. And there's those among us here right now and I thank you. I am glad you are with us. You model faith so well. Whatever turmoil you might be going through, whatever life throws your way whether it's relational or financial or health concerns, you just have this faith. That is so amazing. You are those people in here that continue to seek God despite circumstances, and I'm grateful you are among us and we need you to keep modeling for us what it means.

I've learned some things about God, though, in this journey. I've learned that God creates good. From the very beginning of creation, God is a good creator. God does not author evil. Oh, at times we wrestle with that because evil is allowed to prevail, but God is a God who creates good. Do I believe that? Am I holding onto that beauty?

I've learned that God desires to bless. From the very beginning and through Abram, He wanted to bless Abram, not so Abram can kind of be selfish. No, He blesses so we can bless, but all throughout this whole process, this story, God wants to bless. We skew what blessing means because of our self-centeredness. I am not naïve about that. But that's the theme.

I realize that God comes down to us. God is a God who is pursuing. You compare Christianity to any other religion in the world. Our God is not a distant God. He's not an absent God. He's not a God you are trying to chase down. He's a God who chases us. It's almost scary. He's a heart-sick Father that just loves His kids and He keeps coming down and keeps coming down and keeps coming down. He wants us and He chases us.

I've learned, though, that God will discipline to bring us back. Oh, these are hard things to ponder, right? These are hard things to understand, but He disciplines because He loves us. As a father, as a mother will discipline a child – you are going the wrong way. He will because He loves us so much.

I've learned that God keeps His promises. When God says 'it will happen'. It may not be in the timing we think it should happen or we thought it should happen, but God keeps His promises.

And I've learned that God's Story will prevail. It's happening, whether you choose to connect into it or not, God's story – the over-arching story – will come to fruition. It's His Story. It will happen. It's a choice I make in my lower story. Will I accept it or will I keep muddling around in a story that never connects to the beauty of the upper story?

And so it brings us here to Chapter 19 in our Story book. After the exile, we are actually on our way back up again – on our way back up. And God is bringing them out of exile. And let's see what it has to say, where it takes us. Interestingly, in this micro-story, all these things I've learned about us and God

are taking place all over again. There's really nothing new under the sun, is there? We repeat the same things that took place thousands of years ago. We don't do anything different. Humans are humans. But there's some excitement in here, too.

So let's begin in the Book of Ezra, Chapter 1. I'm sure that's one of the Books you read once a month. It's one of the ones that you've dog-eared in your Bible.

Ezra 1:1

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD [remember, God keeps His promises and God declared something and it will be fulfilled, 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.

Did you hear what just happened there? It's a pagan king, the kingdom that took Israel and took them into captivity, the king himself, God moves his heart. God takes control of who he is. And I don't know how to fully process that. I don't know how often in this time and in this place God is actually moving me or taking me or one of you or leaders from around the world because we have choice. We recognize that from here that God has given us choice. That's why we often choose to not trust God, but there are these moments because God's story will prevail that God will take the heart of someone and move it so that His Story is the story. He does that to Cyrus the king of Persia.

And this is what Cyrus says. It's even more amazing:

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.

Did you hear that? The pagan king admits that God has given him authority and that God wants him to build a temple, and so he says okay, I'll do it. On what planet does that happen, that the pagan king wants to make sure a temple is built for Jehovah? Let me read a chunk of this and I'll come and make some points. It says:

Ezra 1:3-6

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.” 5 Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites – everyone whose heart God had moved – prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. 6 All their neighbours assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.

It goes on:

7 Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. 8 Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

11 In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along with the exiles when they came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

[Ezra 3:4] Then, in accordance to what is written, they celebrated the Festival 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 festivals of the LORD, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the LORD.

What is going on there? You lost me at slide 3, I'm sure. What's taking place? What is so important about the temple that all the details are written? That people are giving gold and silver to this God who moved their hearts, that these 5,400 articles are freed up to go, that Cyrus himself says 'go build it'.

And they start doing all these sacrifices and festivals. What is going on? Why don't they just get out and start building some houses and make themselves go?

You see, God realizes that for them to leave exile and to re-establish themselves as a kingdom, the first thing that needs to be established are the rhythms of faith so they do not once again forget God and start a trajectory down again. The first thing that needs to get established are the rhythms of faith. And we are not going to build a temple today. We are not going to do sacrifices, as was the system back then, but the temple and all these things simply represent those things in our lives, those rhythms that make us not lose track.

Rhythms are good things, aren't they? Many of us are engaging with the Olympics these days, and why are these athletes the athletes they are? Because they understand the rhythms of an athlete. If you want to get to that level, you will eat a certain way and you will exercise a certain way and you will work out a certain way. You will do all these things, otherwise you will never get to that level. You are focused. You do what's required.

Many of you know the rhythms of weight loss, don't you? You enter into rhythms of eating and you eat a certain way and you do certain things, and over that year you lose those thirty, forty pounds, whatever it is. And if you hit it and there's a celebration, and then you toss the rhythms out, right, because you made it and then two years later you wondered what happened to the weight I just gained again.

Rhythms for marriage are important, aren't they? Oh, a couple gets married. It's amazing. It's all these great things and they are giving each other little gifts and it's all beautiful, and then a child comes and a second and maybe a third and the rhythms of child raising and buying houses, of getting a car, of launching my career all take over, right? And you don't even realize you've lost the rhythm of marriage and fifteen years down the road you look at each other and you wonder, who is that person who sleeps beside me every night? And you realize you have just lost an inch a day and you didn't even realize it because you forgot about the rhythms of relationship. Rhythms with our kids. We can go on and on, can't we?

And God recognizes for them to stay focused on Who the Creator was, the One Who wants to bless them, the very first thing they need to establish are the rhythms. The rhythms; they are beautiful. They are amazing. How are your rhythms these days? Aw, some of you model this so amazingly well, so amazingly well.

Well, let's continue on. Ezra, Chapter 3. It says:

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.

There's this interesting almost an aside, this interesting generational moment that goes on here. The older generation knew what it looked like and they are just kind of in pains as to what was. Interestingly, it was under their watch that the entire thing went down, but they remember how good it was. And there's the younger generation, they have no idea what it was but they are thinking, wow, out of exile. Let's go do this and they are excited and shouting for joy. But it's a bit of a pondering here, and I've been thinking about this generational piece and, you know, one thing I love about North Park is the generations that are here. Last year, we celebrated thirty child dedications. I love that. We also have those among us who are in their eighties and their nineties. I love that. The issue is are we loving each other and engaging each other. If you are of a younger generation, are you actually asking and hearing the stories of those who have come before, who know what things were at one time. Oh, we can't go back to what things were, but there are things that we can enjoy and love and engage in.

If you are an older generation, are you reaching back and listening to the hopes and dreams of those who are younger, what they want to do, what they think God is going to do through them? Are you encouraging each other and praying for each other? This is a neat moment.

There's a gentleman who used to go to North Park. He doesn't come here anymore because he is in a senior's residence in St. Thomas - Bob Taylor who was born in 1923. I prayed with Bob for about 8 years on Monday morning at 7 a.m. in Men's Prayer. I love Bob's prayers. Bob's prayers had no flowery words to them at all. Bob grew up a farmer and Bob just told God what it was. He just spoke straight, simple and to the point. Bob was always one of the first ones to pray. And I love going to visit Bob once in a while at the home where he is. I was there a couple of weeks ago and had a chat and I have to remind Bob every time I go who I am. Bob has a little dementia, so I will say 'Bob, it's Matthew from North Park'. 'Oh yes', his eyes light up and we go sit in his room and have a chat and hold his hands, his big rough hands. I prayed for him last time and when I was done praying, Bob said 'I want to pray for you'. I said 'sure, Bob'. And he goes, 'Lord' - then he stops. He says 'Lord, I've already forgotten this man's name'. And I said 'it's Matthew, Bob'. 'Oh, Matthew, yes'. And then he finds two words and then Bob just breaks out into sobs, sobbing uncontrollably. I just hold his hands tight and I said 'Bob, you are a good man, and I loved praying with you all those years. You've impacted my life more than you know. And thank you'. It was a neat moment, and I'm glad his life intersected my life, and I hope I can have more of those moments. Kind of an aside, but these beautiful generational moments taking place. We are there at these times, hand in hand, in many ways celebrating what God is doing, where it's going. Will we do that together?

Ezra 4:4

Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

[verse 24] Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

What just happened here? They just witnessed God move the heart of the pagan king to say 'go and rebuild the temple'. They just witnessed God move

in the hearts of people to give money and to give livestock and to go. They just witnessed a foundation being built and the celebratory thing and the festivals are beginning. They just saw the hand of God move, and now it gets a little bit difficult and they shut the whole thing down. What happened?

It's who we are, isn't it? We get distracted. We lose faith in God's plan. When God has a plan, we think it should be this 4-lane straight highway with no cars and we can just kind of go bombing down it and there is God's plan. It's just smooth and beautiful.

Maybe you are in one of those moments right now. One of those moments where God had moved but now you are facing obstacles and you are wondering 'is this really God's plan?' We've got this great phrase in the Christian world and maybe you've used it, maybe you've heard it. 'God closed the door'. Have you ever heard that phrase? God closed the door. I guess I'm not supposed to do this. Maybe He closed the door, or maybe – it got hard and you think He closed the door but maybe you are supposed to just bust down that door and keep moving forward.

A friend of mine has this great phrase. He says 'what is revealed in the light don't disregard in the dark'. What is revealed in the light don't disregard in the dark. I'll be going through a tough time and he'll say 'Matt, do you really think God called you into that'. And I'll say 'well, ya, I do'. He'll say 'did you pray about it and wrestle with it?' I'll say 'ya, I did'. He'll say 'did you bring other people around you? Did they validate it?' 'Well, ya, they did'. He says 'well, then, go'. 'But it's hard. It's dark.' He says 'Matt, what's revealed in the light don't disregard in the dark. You bust down that door. God has called you into something. It was clear.' It is still clear, but how often do I doubt God's story because it became hard. It feels like He closed the door.

Maybe you are in one of those moments right now. You heard God speak to you. Now if you are not a follower of Jesus here or you are a newer Christian, this kind of may sound strange but we actually believe that God speaks to us. Like in strange and weird ways, the God Who we cannot see, we actually think He reveals Himself to us whether it's

through a time of prayer or a Scripture or conversation, maybe even in a dream, but we have these moments and some of you know what I am talking about. It's like that could only have been God. Right? And He's taking you somewhere, and you go 'okay, God, I am going to go for it' and maybe you are in one of those moments right now where I think I heard God but it really feels dark right now.

The Israelites find themselves in that exact place and what will they do. Well, we go to Haggai, Chapter 1, one of the other favourite books you probably read quite often. In Haggai, it says this:

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.'" [He must have closed the door.]

Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. 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 you are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

You have abandoned what I have for you and you wonder why things aren't going as you thought they would. You see, something happens to our very soul, when we seek life, our own life and miss out on what God has for us. Oh, you may look amazing from the outside in your paneled house. It may appear that everything is going together, but if you are a follower of Jesus and you have stepped away from what He has for you something happens to your very soul and in those moments of quietness, if you truly calm yourself down, you know that inside you are dying and you wonder what's going on.

I just finished a book a month ago called 'You Have A Soul' by John Ortberg. He says the following. He

says: “The soul was not made to run on empty, but the soul doesn’t come with a gauge. The indicators of soul fatigue are a little bit more subtle. Things seem to bother you more than they should. It’s hard to make up your mind, even about the simplest of things. Impulses to eat, drink or spend are harder to resist. You favour short-term gains leaving long-term costs. You have less courage, more fear. Your judgement suffers.’

How is your soul these days? Are you on this upper trajectory in your field and in the blessing and encouragement of God and you are going through stuff and you’ve got peace. You’re not even sure why. You’ve got a healthy soul. But as He said to the Israelites, you guys think life is great but if you really stopped and thought about it, you are missing something. Something happens to our very soul when we get distracted and miss the beauty that God has for us.

Well, the story goes on [Haggai 1:7]:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house [establish those rhythms], so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured,” says the LORD.

[Haggai 1:13] *Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with you.” [Remember, I’m the God Who comes down. I’m the God Who is not distant. I am chasing after you. I am with you. Do you believe that?] So the Lord stirred up the spirit [here we go again] of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. [He gives them an adrenaline boost. ‘Come on, guys, do this’.] [Haggai 2:4] But now be strong, Zerubbabel’, declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’*

[Zechariah 8:14] *This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and show no pity when your ancestors angered me, [remember God will discipline us to bring us back], so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.*

Reset yourselves. Come on back. I want to take you out and let’s try again.

I’m not sure where you are on your journey. As I say these things, I pretty much preach to myself and you can enter into my own journey. I look back over my last two years and I think ‘no, no, I’m’ and then I realize, oh ya, I didn’t trust God’s plan. I wish I could say this is not my life, but too often it is. Too often I live in fear and I lack courage and I wonder why and it’s like ‘oh, my soul’. I’ve not cared for my soul. I’ve not entered into those moments where God has me. Where are you in this journey? Is it time to re-establish those rhythms, not because when they are convenient or not when you feel like it, but just I will establish them because I do not want to lose sight of who God is in me? I do not want to get distracted. God is reaching down. God is with you. God has an upper story He is inviting you to enter into. Will you believe the beauty of that and will you enter into the story and be part of something amazing no matter what happens?

Let’s pray:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the beauty of this. God, thank You that You are good. Thank You that You want to bless. Thank You that You pursue us. God, forgive me. Forgive me when I doubt Your plan, when I argue and fight, when I try to create something that is not what You have for me. Jesus, may we all choose to establish those things of our faith and we will never lose sight of You, and we will have the peace that surpasses understanding that will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Even in times of turmoil we’ll have peace because our souls are connected to you. Oh Jesus, guide us on this journey, we ask. Amen.

Points to Ponder

THE STORY – Ezra: The Return Home

Chapter 19

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. If you've been able to engage with a good portion of *The Story*, what are the overall themes you've discovered about yourself and about God?
2. When have you experienced God "moving your heart" or the heart of someone else? Did you recognize this right away? How did you process this?
3. How have faith rhythms helped you stay focused on God? What rhythms seem to work best for your personality and life circumstance? How have you experienced distance from God when you have lost those rhythms?
4. When have you allowed conflict or distraction to move you away from what you believe God has called you to do or be? How does the phrase "What is revealed in the dark – don't disregard in the light" resonate with you?
5. What are the next steps you need to take to establish a life where you don't lose sight of God? Who do you need to connect with that can help you take these steps? Who could you come alongside to give guidance to?