

**“The Story” / Series 4: “Out of the Ashes”**  
**Sermon 2: Restart (chapter 19) / February 8, 2015**

Wouldn't you like a few do-overs? I'm pretty sure Pete Carroll, the coach of the Seattle Seahawks, would like a do-over for calling that pass play on the Patriots 1 yard line when they were down by 4 points with 26 seconds left to play. Truth is, anyone with a brain would like a few do-overs. Wouldn't you like to go back in time and un-say a few of the words you have said, or un-do a few of the things you have done? I would. I'd have fewer regrets as a Christian, as a husband, as a dad.

How many of you guys have seen the Bill Murray movie, “Groundhog Day”? You guys are old! By the way, it was Groundhog Day last week, and Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow. Which means there will be 6 more weeks of winter, right? Wouldn't you like a do-over for Punxsutawney Phil? Fortunately, since 1988, Phil isn't doing so well. He's been right 12 times, but he's been wrong 15 times. Let's hope he is incompetent again.

Anyway, the movie, “Groundhog Day,” is all about do-overs. Bill Murray has the opportunity to do the same day over, and over, and over again. At first it's awful, and he becomes an absolute jerk. But then he learned to embrace it. And he used his do-overs as an opportunity to change who he was, and how he treated others. Until he lived that day nearly perfectly, after which the cycle was broken.

Unfortunately, it's just a movie; it's just a Hollywood fantasy. You see, I'm not sure do-overs would work. I'm not convinced I would change my ways even if I got a boatload of do-overs. I'm not convinced you would either. And the truth is, as much as we'd like them, we just don't get any do-overs. So sometimes we get to a place where we wish we weren't. And sometimes we reflect and we start thinking, “How'd I get here?” And we look back, and we can track the words we said, that we shouldn't have said, we can track the things we did, that we shouldn't have done. We can see the path we took to get us to this place we don't want to be. But we can't go back and unsay those things we said, or undo those things we did, right? There are no do-overs ... Do overs have to do with the past. But there are ... start overs... Start overs have to do with the future.

Okay, we are in week 19 of The Story. We are going through the story of the Bible in 31 weeks, and we are near the end of the Old Testament part of The Story. We are in the part of The Story where Israel kept messing up. They didn't get any do-overs, but God kept giving them these start-overs ... for a while. But the Israelites were pretty stubborn, like we are. They kept going back to the same old path. They believed in God, but they wouldn't let him be first, in everything. They would drift into idolatry. And God would send prophets to warn them, to turn them around. But they would push back against God, and they would push back against how God wanted them to live. And here's the deal, guys, the more often we make bad choices, the deeper we dig the rut, and the harder it gets to break out of the rut. Been there? Done that?

And here's what they didn't understand. God is amazingly patient, but there comes a time when God says, "That's enough; no more." Eventually there comes a time when it becomes crystal clear that a restart isn't going to help. By this time the people of God have divided into two nations: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. And Israel goes first. God permits Assyria, this powerful and cruel empire from the north, to come down and obliterate Israel. And there are no restarts for Israel. The Israelites are killed or carried off as captives, and then they just disappear from history. About 150 years later God permits Babylon, another powerful empire to the north, to come down and destroy Judah. By the way, Assyria and Babylon were both from what is now Iraq. These conflicts go back ... millennia.

Anyway, Babylon destroyed many of Judah's cities, and they destroyed Judah's temple, and they carried Judah's king and a whole bunch of Judah's leading citizens into exile. We call it the "Babylonian Exile." What Babylon did was to take away everything God had promised them. God has promised the Jews a land of their own. Now they lived in exile. God had promised the Jews a king from the line of David, forever. Now their king was deposed. God had promised them a temple, a sign of his presence in the center of his people. And now their temple was a pile of rubble.

You see they forgot something we tend to forget too. They forgot that with God's blessings come responsibilities – with blessing comes responsibility. And if we fail to fulfill our responsibilities, there are consequences. God

won't tolerate our disobedience forever. Eventually there will be consequences. Do you buy that? It really doesn't matter whether we buy it or not; what matters is whether He buys it. And he does.

Now we think that the sin of Israel of Israel and Judah was an ancient sin – kind of irrelevant to people like us. They kept drifting into idolatry; which is kind of weird to us. Unless you understand idolatry as putting anything else in God's place. For some of us our idol is a person. For some of us our idol is money. For some of us our idol is some pleasure. We've all got them. We all struggle with the same sin – it just looks different for us. Watch this ...

**\*\* Skit Guys Idolatry Video \*\***

Now that was kind of mean, wasn't it? Last week my grandson came home from a UK game: his face was blue and white, he was wearing this blue wig. He was cute. And he's no idolater ... yet. But that will be a danger to him ...

Anyway, God said to them, "That's enough; no more!" And the Jews from Judah were taken off into captivity in Babylon. God says to them, "You won't respect me in the home I gave you?" Well, I'm going to take your home away for a while. Maybe that will help you choose a different path this time when you get your restart.

And it doesn't take them very long in exile to realize what they had, what they lost. But now they can't come home because they are in exile. They are like the family who had all the kids in the neighborhood over at the house one night. And it got kinda late and so Dad ordered all the kids to go home. Then he told his own kids to go to bed. All the neighbor kids scampered out, and his own kids are upstairs starting to get ready for bed. Well, before long dad sees this shadowy figure sneaking down the stairs, and he says, "You need to get to bed. I'm coming up there in just a minute so you better go to bed right now. The little shadowy figure runs away. About 10 minutes later the little guy starts sneaking down the stairs again and dad says, "I told you I'm coming up there. Don't make me come up there. I want your lights out." And the shadowy figure runs away. Pretty soon there is a knock on the door. The neighbor shows up and he says, "Hey is Jimmy here? Dad said, "No I sent him home." Then Jimmy calls

out from the top of the stairs. He says, “I’m up here! This man won’t let me leave!” Well, that’s how the Jews in Babylon felt. “Dad we’re up here! We want to go home now. We’re sorry.” They want to go back home to Jerusalem.

Have you ever been there, felt that? Have you ever looked around and thought to yourself, “I hate where I am,” or “I hate who I am”? My life’s a mess. Maybe your marriage is a mess, or your kids are a mess, or your work is a mess, or your life with God is a mess. Sometimes it takes a real mess to get us to realize that we need to start over, that we need to “go home.” Here’s what’s really cool: God is calling you home – he is calling you back to him (which is home). And God will do whatever it takes to bring you home. You’ve been in Babylon. And you have felt God calling you home.

Well, here’s what happens to these guys in their exile. We’re going to start digging in on page 263 of The Story; if you are following along in your Bible, we’re in the book of Ezra, chapter 1. It says, “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia ...” Persia ... Well that’s new. Earlier in the story the big bad guy was Assyria, a powerful and cruel nation to the north that destroys Israel. The next big bad guy was Babylon. The Babylonians defeat Judah, and take the Jews into exile. Last week when we studied Daniel, he was one of the exiles in Babylon. Well the next big boy in the north was Persia. They just keep knocking each other off. These Persians were the same dudes who went after the Greeks in the movie “300.” Now when Persia takes over, the Jews are still in exile in Babylon. So here’s what happens next.

It says, “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 (did you get that: God worked through the king of Persia) to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing ...” This is pretty cool. God is going to get it done. Sometimes he will use those who follow him; sometimes he will use those who don’t. He can do that, because, well, ... he’s God, and God’s going to get it done.

So this is the proclamation of Cyrus, king of Persia: “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. 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. 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.”

Now this is big: God doesn't just prompt Cyrus to let the Jews go home, he prompts Cyrus to help them build their temple again. Do you know why? ... Because Judah won't really be their home without God at their center. Guys, we are people of God. We were created to do life with God. Life won't work right, life will always have this emptiness, unless God is in his rightful place. You see, before Jesus, the temple represented God's presence with his people. It was a visible reminder of who they were, and how they were to live. And it provided them a way to do life with God, to meet him. So God actually uses this pagan king to help them start over, putting first things first. Pretty cool!

So in 538 B.C., nearly 50,000 Jews pack up their stuff, and walk 900 miles home (that's a long walk; that's like walking from Frankfort to Orlando). And when they get home, they take a nap, and then the first thing they do is go to work on their temple. Pretty cool: first things first; and for us, the first things are always his. So the Jews get off to this great start. They lay the foundation for the temple. And they built an altar, and despite the fact that the people who were already there were hostile to them, the Jews began offering sacrifices to their “in the beginning God,” morning and night. It says, “When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites ... 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 toward 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.”

That's good stuff. They were giving the glory to the one who deserved it. They were recommitting themselves to being a people of God. It was a great restart. The people were pumped; they were excited about being

home; they were reconnecting with God; they were taking a stand that took courage.” That’s all cool!

But it’s pretty easy to start strong; it’s a whole lot tougher to finish strong. Right? I’ll bet a whole lot of you started strong with God. I did. In fact, I’ll bet a lot of you have started strong with God several times – you’ve had these restarts. I have. But then we slip back into old habits, we find ourselves wandering old paths. You see, starting strong is easy. It’s those middle miles that are so hard. It was for them too. We are told that some of the people who were already living there didn’t like this restart, and they tried to disrupt the work of these Jews. And the truth is, it’s just hard for them to start over. There were homes to build, and fields to plant – they had children to feed.

So for whatever reason, after starting so strong, they just kind of quit. I don’t know ...

- Maybe building this temple was just harder than they imagined. How long would it take us to build a house together – Weeks? Months? How long would it take us to build this church we’re in? By ourselves. Without power tools. Months? Years? And the temple they were trying to build was more than this.
- (Ezra 4.4-5 on screen) Or maybe they got worn down by the people around them who didn’t like what they were doing. There were those who didn’t want the temple rebuilt. They did whatever they could to make the work more difficult. They fought the Jews in Planning and Zoning, they tried holding up their permits, they kept sending OSHA inspectors down to shut down the jobsite, they’d sneak in at night and steal the copper. Add to that their taunts, and their mockery, and their ridicule, and their insults. That would wear on you, wouldn’t it?
- Or maybe it was just “life” that pulled them away from God. Life does that, you know. It pulls us away from God. I know I should give my first part back to God, but there’s the house payment, and the car payment, and the utilities, and the doctor bills, and the kids need new clothes, and I’ve got an opportunity to get some tickets to the tournament. Maybe I’ll give the first part back to God next month. Or, I’d like to spend more time doing stuff for God, but there’s the wife, and there’s the kids, and a man needs some time with his friends, and a man needs some time just to enjoy his nothing box.

I don't know – there are a thousand reasons we start strong, and finish poorly. There are a thousand reasons we try to restart our life with God, and then drift back into the same old habits, the same old ruts. And I am telling you guys, the more often you slip back into old ruts, the harder it is get free of them later.

You see – this has been happening for thousands of years. Listen, most of us here have been baptized. We gave our lives to God; we accepted Jesus as our Savior and Lord. We know what is right. And most of us have drifted away from God. Sometimes it's sin that pulls us away. Sometimes people around us pull us away from God. Sometimes it's just life: we just get busy with stuff, and God gets second place, and then third place, and then we barely think of him at all. And a lot of us have looked around and said to ourselves, I hate where I am, I hate what I am. So we restarted our life with God, once or twice, or more. We kind of hit reboot on our life with God. And all too often we just drift again. Sometimes it's the same old sin that pulls us away. Sometimes it's the same old people who pull us away from God. Sometimes it's just life: we just get busy with stuff again, and then God gets second place again, and then third place, and then we barely think of him at all. And we wonder – we wonder – why life just isn't that great. We wonder how we got to this place where we really don't want to be...

C.S. Lewis is one of my heroes. He said, "If you put first things first, you get second things thrown in. But if you put second things first, you lose both first and second things." Did you get that? If you put first things first – if you keep on putting first things first, even when it's hard – you get second things thrown in. But if you put second things first – which is idolatry – you lose both first and second things. Jesus put it like this: "Seek the Kingdom of God first (pursue the Kingdom of God above all else; keep on putting God first), and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." Put first things first, and you get second things thrown in. But if you put second things first, you always lose ...

I don't think the Jews tried to drift away from God. There were homes to finish, there were crops to plant, there were clothes to mend. "I just need to take this week off." Or, "I'll be back next month, I swear." Or, "Just give me till harvest." One time Jesus tells this guy, "Follow me." The guy says, absolutely – as soon as I take care of my dad, he's old. Jesus says, "Let

the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Now that’s just hard! First things first; and he always gets first place. Another guy says to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” And Jesus says, “No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s kingdom off till tomorrow.”

Anyway, one by one they quit showing up for work at the temple. And over time, the sacrifices grew fewer, the praise grew quieter. God was becoming more and more irrelevant – even though this was all his deal! A month, a year, 5 years, 10. 16 years the job went undone! The foundation was there, the altar was there, and then just ... weeds. Have you ever seen an abandoned job-site? That’s what the temple looked like. Weeds covering over the footers of their faith. Ever been there, felt that?

Others see it. They see it in us. How long do you think it took for the people who were watching them to conclude that these Jews just didn’t take their God all that seriously? How long do you think it took their kids to conclude that their parents really weren’t all that into this “in the beginning God.” Our kids watch us guy. What we do is way more powerful than what we say. What do our kids conclude about what He’s worth when they watch us?

Do you know what’s going on? It kind of boils down to this. It kind of boils down to what the apostle John said about the church in Ephesus. He says, “You don’t love me as you did at first.” (Revelation 2.5) You have allowed your heart to drift. You have allowed your love to fade... Ever been there? Felt that? ... I have. It’s a terrible place to be.

Well, God sees all this going on. Months ago we talked about the upper story and the lower story. While all this is happening in the lower story, God is working in the upper story to give us another ... restart. He’s amazing that way! God sends them a promise named Haggai. That’s not one were all that familiar with. Not too many kids running around named Haggai – fortunately. Well here’s what God tells his people – here’s what he tells us, kind of – through the prophet Haggai. If you are following along in the Story, we’re on page 266; Haggai chapter 1. He says, “Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses” ... This was apparently written in the 60’s when paneling was in! “Is it time for you

yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house (God's temple) remains a ruin?" Have you forgotten he always deserves first place? Haggai says, "Give careful thought to your ways." Think hard guys! Think about it! "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. This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways."

Think, guys! Haggai says, "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." God isn't just telling them that he has withdrawn his blessing; he's telling them that it should be obvious that he has withdrawn his blessing. Because ... Because ... why is it that we expect God's blessings when we refuse to put first things first? Why do we get annoyed with God for not giving me happiness and peace, when I refuse to give him first place? That's just dumb! I wonder how many sitting here in this room are living unblest lives, and can't figure out why.

Now back then – with these Jews coming home from their exile, being scolded by the prophet Haggai, it's all about physical blessings. They didn't have enough food, they didn't have enough money, they didn't have enough of anything because they didn't finish God's temple. It's not really about material things for us. This is not prosperity gospel. Some of us have plenty of money. Most of us have plenty of food, and drink. But life is still empty. We still find ourselves in these places we don't like. The money doesn't satisfy, the food doesn't satisfy, the job doesn't satisfy, the marriage doesn't satisfy, the play doesn't satisfy, the vacations don't satisfy. You ever feel like – there just has to be more? We are like children who are playing with the wrapping paper, and ignoring the real gift inside. Here's what I believe guys: if it's just not working, God isn't in his rightful place in your life. If there's a hole in your life you can't fill, God isn't in his rightful place in your life. Don't expect God to fill that hole with anything else ... except himself. You will never be "home" until God is in his rightful place. And when he's in his rightful place, he just might throw in all those other things you think you want. Or he might not. But you'll discover it doesn't really matter.

So ... whose house did you build in 2014 – God’s temple (in you), or your own house? You happy? Whose house are you building right now, February 8, 2015 – God’s temple (in you), or your own house? If you put first things first, you get second things thrown in. But if you put second things first, you lose both first and second things.” Did you buy that? I do. If you put first things first – if you keep on putting first things first, even when it’s hard – you get second things thrown in. But if you put second things first – which is idolatry – you lose both first and second things. Jesus put it like this: “Seek the Kingdom of God first (pursue the Kingdom of God above all else; keep on putting God first), and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.”

Here’s what’s really cool. God keeps giving us these restarts. We don’t get any do-overs, but he offers us a restart – that’s grace. Will it be different this time? Can you stay focused on first things first, on giving God his rightful place? It’s the only way to experience the life you were made for. If your life is not where you want it to be, if what you are pursuing is not filling the emptiness inside you – it’s time. It’s time. It’s time to start over ... and this time it’s time to finish well. What’s going to make it different this time? How are you going to keep first things first, this time? It’s worth it guys ...