

THE SECOND TEMPLE

One of the things some people love most about the Christian Faith is the offer of Second Chances. This seems incredible and wonderful to those of us who make mistakes – and can admit them. Second Chances have no meaning to those who have no notion of doing anything differently. Without repentance, a Second Chance is just more of the same, and the results will be more of the same. But if we are suddenly aware of God’s presence in new ways, and in that presence see new light and hope, then Second Chances are dramatic and dynamic beyond description. We use words like transformation, conversion, revival, born anew. It is the power behind the Reformation, behind the Puritans, behind every reconciliation. We hope and believe that it will be a major theme in the Life To Come.

I am endlessly fascinated by stories of Second Chances. They are all around us. When we are part of them, age and depression and discouragement flee, and we are alive again in ways both wonderful and miraculous. If you look at the stories of the encounters people had with Jesus, there is always this theme of Second Chances. Whether it is Mary Magdalene, or Nicodemus; whether it is a leper, a blind beggar, or a man paralyzed; whether it is Zacchaeus or Peter or a Gerasene demoniac – always there is the offer of a Second Chance. In a few cases, the offer is rejected, as with the rich young ruler, or as was ultimately true of the leadership of the nation. But you cannot show me a single story of an encounter with Jesus – your own, or anybody else’s – in which Jesus is not offering Second Chances. And not just little ones, but transformational, change-your-whole-life kinds of chances.

As usual, Jesus does not invent the theme; He brings it to apex. One of the most dramatic stories about a Second Chance is buried in what I call the “No-Man’s Land of Scripture.” There are several, to be sure: Most people get pretty vague between the death of Moses and the coming of King David. I suppose they don’t like that “Joshua Judges Ruth.” (A great album by Lyle Lovett, by the way.) But far more people begin to fade out in the Divided Monarchy after Solomon. If you remind them, they know a bit about Elijah, and they know the names of great prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and maybe even Amos. But after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. – the Babylonian Captivity – the fade-out is almost complete for most people until the coming of Jesus.

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Over the next four Sundays, I want to tell you the story of a Second Chance. It should be a famous story, but the material is difficult, and four Sundays will be woefully inadequate in terms of time. But you will be delighted with the principles revealed, and once known, you will never forget this story.

As I mentioned, Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C. Actually, its destruction began with a series of disasters. The Northern Kingdom had fallen to Assyria in 722 B.C., 135 years earlier. The Southern Kingdom of Judah had experienced a miraculous, last-minute deliverance. And the people had been hanging on, hopeful that the miracle meant God would not let them be destroyed. But despite Jeremiah's warnings and King Josiah's reforms, many thought cockiness, rather than repentance, was a proper response to the miracle. 587 B.C. was only the end of the disasters, and only the end because there was nothing left – no Jerusalem, no temple; just a pile of rubble, and all but a handful of citizens (the least-desirable) carried off to Babylon. As you have gathered, by this time Babylon had defeated and superseded Assyria as the major empire in the world.

Have you ever felt that your life – and all your dreams – was over? Forgive me, but what if it had not been four terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, but dozens – until all our major cities were in ruins, our economy was gone without hope of recovery, and you had lost your homes, your jobs, and eighty percent of your friends and relatives – and your only hope of survival was to become a useful servant to vengeful conquerors with different values, language, and religion? America and all its churches and hopes and dreams in ashes. Would that be a faith crisis? Would you wonder: Where is God? Is faith all just “made up” – a false chimera of human contrivance and wishful thinking? Most of the time you would be busy just trying to survive, of course, but when you had brief chances to be with others who used to be part of a nation and a culture that no longer existed, would you still feel a bond with them? Would you still wonder, despite all evidence to the contrary, if maybe somehow, someday, there would be a way to rebuild what was lost? And would it cross the minds of a few of you that, while we were asking and wondering where God was, maybe a high percentage of us hadn't been paying very much attention to God, to what God wanted, or to what we had all promised God, back when we had the chance and things were going well?

Well, that was precisely the situation for the Jews during the Babylonian Captivity. Many of them lost their faith forever. And who could blame them? The miracle was that a significant number of them became more religious, more faithful, more prayerful, more thoughtful, and more devoted to God than ever before. They didn't know if there would ever be a Second Chance – for them, for their children, or for their children's children. But they worked hard and did well in Babylon. And they gathered together whenever they got the chance. They studied and prayed together far more than they ever had in former times, when it would have been easy to do so. They taught their children the ways of their religion, their traditions, their holy writings. And without any seeable hope, they lived in hope anyway.

However, nothing on earth stays the same. Babylon looked invincible but lasted a very short time. In 539 B.C., forty-eight years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Cyrus conquered Babylon. So what? So the Persian Empire was on the rise, and the Babylonians, together with their Jewish hostages, were swallowed up into the new empire. Only, Cyrus was a different breed of conqueror. The Assyrians had believed that if they were mean, ugly, and cruel enough, nobody would ever dare oppose or attack them. A familiar stance. Cyrus thought it would be a better idea to have all the gods on his side, and to have all the peoples in his empire grateful to him and wishing him well – even praying for him and offering sacrifices for him – instead of hating him.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, came something nobody had imagined: Only a year after he had secured his rule, Cyrus issued a decree that all the Jews who wished to could return to Palestine, and there rebuild their temple. Not only that, but all the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple would be returned with the exiles as they marched home.

Are you tracking? Out of nowhere, with no explanation, God has suddenly influenced the heart of the King of Persia to allow the Jewish exiles to go back home and rebuild their temple. Is God real after all?! Are the temple and Judaism important after all? Even if *they* no longer believe it, the King of Persia – who isn't even Jewish – *does* believe it. So the Covenant is not over; the promises are not dead and gone; their way of life is not a thing of the past, a figment of imagination to be swept from the earth. How incredible! And of course, with this great joy and hope comes an enormous weight of responsibility: If there is a God – and if God is delivering us – then the Babylonian Captivity was no

accident. We were being punished. We were being taught a lesson. We were destroyed because we were not being faithful, were not keeping the Covenant, were not paying any attention to the ways and will of God. If you posit God, then there is meaning and purpose. There are reasons for what happens. And if there is a reason for deliverance, then there was also a reason for the destruction. In any case, it seems very clear to those Israelites that “We are GETTING A SECOND CHANCE, and this time we better do it right!” I am not asking if you believe this; I am telling you that you can be very sure *they* believed it.

So let’s make sure we are all clear: They are going back to Jerusalem, to build the Second Temple. They have been given a Second Chance. Their leader is Zerubbabel, commissioned by Cyrus to lead the group and see to the construction of the Second Temple. He is a second Moses, leading the Children of Israel out of the land of bondage back to the Promised Land. It will be necessary to reestablish the Covenant, just as the first Moses had to establish the Covenant once they were out of Egypt. There is no point or purpose without the Covenant between God and God’s people. Without that, why bother!

Who is Zerubbabel? He is the grandson of Jehoiachin, the last reigning king in David’s line when Jerusalem was destroyed. So they are going back to Jerusalem for a Second Chance under the leadership of a king in David’s line. In a way, Zerubbabel is a traditional Messiah. Out of disaster, he is God’s agent to bring Israel back into the plan and destiny God has for them. And that is exactly how the people see it. They are understandably elated that out of such a bleak and hopeless night, suddenly they are back in God’s plan, and it is daylight again.

Jeremiah 22:24-27 is one of Jeremiah’s most scathing prophecies, pronouncing God’s judgment on King Jehoiachin (Zerubbabel’s grandfather), saying that God had torn the signet ring off his own right hand and flung it into exile. It was tantamount to saying that David’s line was at an end – that David’s line could no longer be God’s emissaries or rulers, despite all promises to the contrary. They had been too faithless, too many times, for too long. But now Haggai (2:23) proclaims that Zerubbabel, Jehoiachin’s grandson, is being made the Lord’s signet ring again – we are back in business! God holds his Davidic king dear, and is now restoring the Davidic line in Zerubbabel. (Haggai is one of the minor prophets, who are “minor” not because they are unimportant, but because they wrote shorter books.)

Of course, this also means that Zerubbabel is the great, great (etc.) grandfather of Jesus. This is clearly stated in Matthew 1:12-13 and Luke 3:27. Maybe you have to become a grandfather before you pay significant attention to such things. In any case, no Zerubbabel – no Jesus.

But back in 538 B.C., Zerubbabel is marching to Jerusalem with a band of stalwart pilgrims – and with clear credentials from Cyrus, King of Persia – carrying the sacred vessels of the First Temple with them so they can resume traditional sacrifices as soon as they rebuild the temple. Over the next few weeks, I will tell you about some of the adventures they had, some of the trials and struggles they encountered, and some of the additional labors of the faithful people under Ezra and Nehemiah.

Today I want to leave you thinking of and pondering Second Chances. Is there any power under Heaven that can give you authentic Second Chances? They only come from God. We cannot design them, manufacture them, time them, or bring them to fruition. We can only be watchful, stay alert, and be ready when they are offered.

However, there are no Second Chances without repentance, without a change of heart – without a willingness to renew commitment, and to do things in ways both new and more faithful than we ever did them in the past.

Finally, this comment from Paul, in First Corinthians (3:16): *“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”*

There is more than one form of “temple.” Have you ever needed a Second Chance, ever needed to build a Second Temple? Have you been in exile? Has the temple been torn down? Is it time to rebuild the temple, purify it, put it back in business? God in Christ Jesus can arrange such an invitation, and provide the power to make it possible. But we have to want it – be eager for it – and be ready to leave Babylon and head for home when the opportunity is offered.

Is it time for a Second Temple ... for you?