Introduction:

We come to Chapter 19 in The Story. God’s people have been stuck in Babylon for seventy years. They are speaking, and eating, and dressing, and living like Babylonians. Everything back home is broken in Judah. Babylon was never intended to be their new permanent home. So, how did God get them back home? Today we’ll learn about three important words

1. Promises. God never forgets and God never fails when it comes to His promises.

   Let’s look at page 264, Ezra 1:1. Jeremiah prophesied that the people would return. It took almost 70 years.

   How long do you wait for promises to be fulfilled? Will they really be faithful? Promises made on wedding days? Just because someone makes promises doesn’t mean they will come through. With other people, it is necessary and wise to have a backup plan; we hedge our bets. But when God promises, He never forgets and He never fails.

   Psalm 145:13. “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.”

   Several chapters ago we read about Joshua. Joshua knew about God’s faithfulness all the way to his grave (23:14). “Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.”

   But what about you? It’s hard for some. You’ve been let down. You’ve been dropped. People break promises every single day. “God, will you let me down, too?”

   2 Cor. 1:20. “No matter how many promises God has made, they are “YES” in Christ.” In Christ Jesus, the answer is Yes.


2. Providence.
What is providence? God’s provision. God provides from surprising places. For the Jews, God’s providence comes from Cyrus. Cyrus the Great ruled from 559-530 BC. He ruled the largest empire the world had yet seen from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Indus River in the east, ruling over the Persians, the Medes, the Babylonians, the Sumerians, and the Akkadians. His empire stretched from modern Turkey, across Iraq and Iran, to Afghanistan and Pakistan, almost to China and India. It’s a vast empire.

God uses Cyrus the Great to send His people home and to help them rebuild their home. Cyrus decided to allow the people of Judah to return home and to rebuild a temple. Cyrus provided so much for the Jews to return home. It was actually God who provided so much, and He did it in ways that are surprising and unexpected. The neighbors were asked to make large donations. God always provides.

God can use people who were even unwilling, uninitiated, uninformed. God is the God of Heaven and Earth, not just a few. He used Egypt to increase His nation from seventy to hundreds of thousands. He used Babylon to renew His people. He used the Persians to return them to their home and rebuild that home. He used the Romans to enable His message to spread through the known world by their roads and language. He has used so many others—not just the Jewish people—because He is a global God.

God makes promises that He doesn’t forget. He provides in ways we don’t expect. It’s hard for us to keep focused. God made sure that the Jews had EVERYTHING they needed.

The prophet Haggai delivers a message about God’s providence. “In a little while, I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory” (Haggai 2:6-7). It’s a look ahead to a Messiah, the desire of nations.

We enjoy learning about his promises and his providence. It’s good to be reminded of His faithfulness and His blessing. The last lesson we learn starts to hurt a little.

3. Priorities.
Fifty thousand men and women make the 900-mile trek from Babylon to Jerusalem. When they arrive, their first move is to build an altar to worship the Lord who has brought them home.
The crowd is mixed. Many are thinking about how things used to be, and they weep. Others are thinking about what could be, and they rejoice. Overall, there is resolve. “We will renew our land. We will rebuild.” And exciting work begins. Foundations for a new temple are laid in the first year of their return.

But then God’s people got distracted. They quit work on the temple and started working on their own homes and businesses. And for another fifteen years, nothing has taken place on the temple. And that’s where Haggai comes in.

2 This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’”

3 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?” (Page 266)

It’s important to see that on no single day did the people say, “Let’s stop working on this right now. Let’s put this off until a better time.” They all simply slipped away, little by little, until there was no one left rebuilding the temple.

It’s true in our day, too. Very few people stand up, turn away, and run from God. Most just slip away. Unless people are diligent, priorities change and they can end up far from God.

Why was the temple so important? Why should it have been first to be rebuilt? God’s temple was the center of life for God’s people. Sacrifices were made. It was where God lived with His people. It’s where they met Him.

This is not a sermon about money for buildings. God’s temple is inside us. He’d like for us to focus on its foundations. He wants to be first. What the Jews had in first place didn’t satisfy. Put God and His house back in the right priority, and everything else will fall into place.

Haggai goes on to speak for God (p. 267):

5 Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 6 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.”

7 This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 8 Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord. 9 “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. 10 Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. 11 I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells the people that they should seek God’s kingdom and righteousness FIRST, and then all “these things,” everything else like food and clothing, will be given.

It’s is true with tithing, even though it’s not the focus. You can give and God will provide. It’s true with service, too. Trust God and He will provide. Make Him the priority.