

A person's silhouette is visible on the left side of the frame, holding a lit lantern. The lantern is rectangular with a metal frame and a handle, and it contains a lit candle. The background is a soft, blue and purple twilight sky over a field of tall grass or reeds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Sept/Oct 2023

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

going
HOME

ALSO: WATERS OF THE BIBLE

"There's no place like home," we sometimes say with a sigh of relief as we arrive home. Of course, the deep feelings tied to our sense of home are more than about a physical place. So many things are wrapped around home—love, meals, warmth, safety, comfort, celebrations—all helping to make life rich and meaningful.



Yet, as Pastor Joel Vande Werken reminds us in September, our feelings for home ultimately draw from a longing to be safe and secure in the arms of God, our heavenly Father. We can take comfort that no matter where we are or in what circumstances we find ourselves, we can be at home with God, who will never leave or forsake us. Through the sacrifice of his Son, God has given us everything we need in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Then, in October, missionary teacher Kristopher Walhof invites us to reflect on water imagery in the Bible—and how it can help us ponder God's care and love for us. Our Lord calls us to trust in him as the "living water," and God shows that we can rest secure in him despite the powerful, destructive storms that may threaten us in life. We also learn that the water of baptism is a sign and seal of God's redeeming love and promises to us in Christ, giving us the comfort and courage to live with confidence and to share God's love with the world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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“Going Home”
Joel Vande Werken



“Waters of the Bible”
Kristopher Walhof

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ReFrame
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september

Going Home

Joel Vande Werken

Have you traveled far from home? At some points in our lives, many of us have had opportunities to go on trips, even if just for a day or two. Some of us may also have gone away to school, or to find work, and we may have spent a long time away.

Perhaps our time away was planned and gave us a lot of joy. At other times, though, our journeys can be unplanned and stressful. Our travels can be caused by events that prompt us or even force us to go and find a new home. Whatever the case, we need to know that at the end of the road there is a place where we can belong, a place we can call home.

The Christian life is like that. At times we can journey along peacefully, enjoying the blessings of comfort and joy that Christ brings. At other times we can feel stretched and challenged and even uprooted in our spiritual life. Though challenges can help us grow in faith, we need to know that along the way God is always with us. Thankfully, the God who calls us to have faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, always cares for us, promising never to leave or forsake us. This is the God of grace and forgiveness, who fills us with his Spirit and welcomes us to enjoy life in his presence, giving us a place to call home wherever we may be. This month let's reflect on these things as we explore some of the Bible's passages about home.

Joel Vande Werken has been a pastor since 2007, serving churches in Sussex, New Jersey, and in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. He and his wife, Brandie, have four young children.

HOME

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

—Psalm 23:6

In many parts of North America, where I live, summer is a season of vacations. People leave their homes and go traveling to explore new places or to stay in familiar getaways. Being away offers opportunities to take a break from everyday tasks and routines.

But a lot can happen when you're away from home. When our family goes to a vacation home, we find that cooking plans can get complicated because the kitchen doesn't have the pans or cooking supplies we are used to at home. The roads and stores are unfamiliar too, and we have to navigate new uncertainties. Sometimes people face medical emergencies when they are away from home, and crises like that be very difficult because there is little or no support network.

"There's no place like home," an old saying reminds us. This

is true for us spiritually as well. We are created to be at home in God's presence. And while sin may promise adventures, the places it can bring us do not provide the security of being at home with God.

Psalm 23 reminds us of the God who cares for us along the journey of life. And God offers us a home, a place of welcome through the promises and presence of his Son and Spirit. This month, let's explore how the Bible invites us to be at home with God.

Holy God, thank you that we can depend on you to guide and lead us. Assure us through your Son and Spirit that we can always be at home with you. Amen.

OUR FIRST HOME

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.
—Genesis 2:15

In the beginning, there was no reason to leave home because humanity lived in paradise. The garden God had created provided everything needed for human flourishing. Even work in the garden was fulfilling and comfortable. The Bible pictures God's extravagant care as a free gift of grace for his creatures.

From the world's beginning, God offered us human beings a place to live in his presence with everything we needed. We could delight in God's being with us, and we could enjoy being at home with ourselves before God.

So why would we ever leave? As the Bible portrays it, one essential element of our sense of home is contentment, an ability to rest in God's care for us. So when God sets limits, such as a tree from which we may not eat, can we trust that

this is for our good? As we will see, humans find it difficult to be content. We prefer instead to make our own way, to find a place where we can follow our own desires. And we forever run away from the perfect home with God.

But ever since we left the garden, we have been spiritually thirsty, longing for those rivers overflowing with God's created goodness. Only in his Son, Jesus, does God offer a return to contentment. Will you follow him home today?

Lord, we find it hard to rest in your extravagant grace and provision. Forgive us. Help us to be content. Give us rest in the finished work of Christ that brings us home with you. Amen.

PARADISE LOST

The LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. —Genesis 3:23

As I write, the news is filled with stories of hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildfires. In addition to their destructive impacts on nature, disasters like these have long-term effects on the many people whose homes and towns they destroy. If we lose our home, we lose not only a place to live but also a sense of security and belonging.

Our first human home was lost because of the fall into sin. The devil tempted Adam and Eve with the false promise that they could decide better for themselves and did not need to listen to God. But that was a lie, and our first parents' fall into sin brought judgment and death for us all. As a result, humanity is now homeless, and we cannot make our own way back to the security of God's presence.

We still struggle under the effects of sin today. In this world we are cut off from God, and even our best human efforts fall short of repairing broken relationships or creating the paradise we long for.

But God is not finished with us. God graciously provides for us so that we are able to survive away from home. And he asks still, "Where are you?" giving us an opportunity to recognize our homelessness and to follow the path to return home through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Loving God, we long for a place of security and belonging with you. Provide for everyone who needs an earthly home, and restore us all to your presence in Christ, we pray. Amen.

A FUTURE HOME

"To your offspring I will give this land."

—Genesis 12:7

For many people, owning their own home is a great dream and a great blessing. Home ownership allows people to build equity and gain financial security. It also gives them a place to call their own—with private living space and a yard.

The Bible gives us glimpses of humanity's search for a home. But one thing we soon discover is that our dream home cannot really be the one we build for ourselves. Abram, it seems, had a good life in Harran, where his extended family was living. He had possessions and household servants. He was prosperous and successful.

But Harran could not be his home. "Go . . ." God said, "to the land I will show you." God led Abram to the land of Canaan and said that his descendants would receive this land. So this would one day be their home. But Abram

lived in tents, without a permanent dwelling. He had to learn to wait for God to build the home that he longed for.

Many of us are longing for a place of our own. We learn from the Bible that what we really long for is a place with God: a place where God is present with us, a place where we can worship God and lean on his grace. We cannot build that home with our own efforts, but only by waiting on the work of God in Christ.

Faithful God, we want a place to belong, a place where we can lean on your grace for all we need. Guide us to trust in Jesus, and restore us to our home with you. Amen.

RUNNING FROM HOME

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land."
—Genesis 28:15

Jacob was running away from home. He had stolen his older brother's inheritance (see Genesis 27), and now his brother, Esau, wanted to kill him. So, to save his own life, Jacob was fleeing the place that should have been home.

Sometimes we shatter our experience of home with our sinful actions. We betray our marriages. We ruin family relationships with our jealousy. We antagonize neighbors with our angry words. We find that we can no longer feel at home in the place we ought to belong.

Yet even when we are running away, God can meet us in unexpected places with his promises. Jacob was not looking for God; there was nothing special about the "certain place" where he stopped for the night. But in his dream, Jacob's eyes were opened to see that no place is outside of

God's presence (Psalm 139:7). And he heard God's assurance that even though Jacob had done wrong, God would keep his promise to Jacob's family and bring him back home.

Jacob's experience anticipates the way God restores sinners through the work of Jesus. Even as we are still running, God meets us with the assurance that he will watch over us and bring us back to himself. And we discover that being in God's presence is a refuge for all who feel away from home.

Almighty God, our sins cause us to run from you. Amaze us with your grace, and help us to trust in your promises to forgive us and return us home to you, through Jesus. Amen.

SEEKING GOD'S WILL FOR THE JOURNEY

"I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again."
—Genesis 46:4

Jacob, who was now called Israel, had reconciled with his brother, Esau, and was living back in Canaan (Genesis 32-33). But after staying there for many years, he was on the move again. His son, Joseph, whom he had thought was dead (Genesis 37), had become a ruler in Egypt. And there was a great famine in the land (Genesis 41-45), so Jacob went to Egypt to live out the rest of his days.

Sometimes God moves us in unexpected and surprising ways. A new job opportunity comes our way. Our grown children move to a different part of the country, and we follow. Moving can be difficult: we leave behind what is familiar, and the new place we go—even if it's exciting—is unknown and unpredictable.

Jacob spends time with God in worship on his way to Egypt.

He needs to know that God will be with him, that God's promises will be valid in this new place as well. He expresses his readiness to do whatever God tells him: "Here I am," he says. And God promises to bring Jacob's family back to their home in Canaan again.

When we face unexpected opportunities in life, do we seek God's will in worship and prayer? As followers of Christ walking in step with his Spirit, we are assured that the Lord will always be with us. So we can journey with God's promises—no matter where we go.

God of new opportunities, thank you for unexpected places and opportunities in which to serve you. Help us to discern your will and leading, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

NEVER FORGET WHERE HOME IS

Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place."
—Genesis 50:25

"Never forget where home is." Joseph probably didn't say these very words, but if you stood by his deathbed that day, there was little doubt about what he meant.

Joseph's last words were all the more remarkable because he hadn't lived at "home" for many years. He had grown successful and prosperous in Egypt. His children lived there. For all intents and purposes, Egypt was his home.

But knowing where home is means you have to know first of all where you have come from and where you belong. Many people grow up somewhere and never leave, and they cannot imagine living anywhere else. But in our increasingly mobile societies today, "home" can be harder to recognize. Where am I from,

if I've lived in a dozen places during my lifetime?

Joseph reminded his brothers that their home was the place God had promised to their forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And one day God would bring them back there.

No matter how successful we may become in a particular place, the Christian's home is defined by adoption into the family of God. Our home with God is only possible because God has come to our aid in Christ. Never forget that you belong to this faithful Savior.

You have told us, Father, that there is a place where we can live with you. You have sent your Son and Spirit to lead us there. May we never forget where we belong. Amen.

LOOKING FOR A BETTER COUNTRY

They did not receive the things promised . . . admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. —Hebrews 11:13

Every summer my wife and I load up our van and spend a week camping with our kids. The children are old enough now to help with setting up the tent and the campsite and settling in to the routines of the week. We look forward to these times away together.

But living in a tent is no substitute for a solid home. The writer of Hebrews, looking back at the stories of Israel's patriarchs (which we've examined in the past week), makes clear that something deeper drives our search for home. In faith we are "looking for the city . . . whose architect and builder is God."

Not all of us might recognize this deeper search, of course. Often we pull up stakes in search of *something* that will make our lives better. We imagine we can trade the hardships and heartaches of one situation for a week at the cot-

tage, or with a new boyfriend or girlfriend, or with a stiff drink, or a new job, or a nicer home—whatever will seem to fulfill our longing. But the best this world can offer is mere tent camping compared to the home with "many rooms" that our Savior prepares for us (John 14:2).

The patriarchs, by faith, *went* somewhere. They followed God's call or discovered that God was with them as they went. And they learned that just going *somewhere* could never satisfy the longing that only God could fulfill.

Do we know that as well?

Savior, lead us by your Spirit through our journey of life. Bring us safely to the home you have prepared for us by your grace. Amen.

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER?

Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise.
—Psalm 106:24

My computer shows me interesting pictures each time it starts up. As I prepare to log in with my password, I see images of beautiful places around the world: tropical islands, scenic mountain meadows, stunning landscapes, bustling city streets. These images, of course, are carefully selected to catch my attention. Not surprisingly, I often go searching for information about some of these places, even wondering what it would be like to live there.

Have you heard the old saying “The grass is always greener on the other side . . .”? Of course, I have to remember that living in a mountainous paradise would lack many of the things I appreciate at home. My family and friends don’t live there. The community connections and conveniences I have are not there. But at times I am still

tempted by the lure of a new place.

Something like that can happen to us spiritually too. The psalmist recalls how God gave his people a home. God brought them out of Egypt and protected and provided for them. But Israel often longed for something different, thinking they could do better. Yet, in running from God, they ran from the One who provided their true home.

Our sinful hearts easily forget the gift of the home we have with God. Can we recognize the dangers of our restlessness?

“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.” God, remind us of the grace of serving you where you place us, and keep us near you in Jesus. Amen.

WHAT MAKES US FORGET OUR HOME?

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God. . . .

—Deuteronomy 8:11

It takes work to maintain a home. Whether you own your own residence or rent from others, there are always little maintenance projects that creep up: light bulbs need replacing, lawns need mowing, faucets begin to drip, doors need to be repainted. Sometimes we put the work off for another day, but if we wait too long the home will deteriorate. A home always needs regular maintenance.

We can also face temptations to take our home with God for granted. When times are good, we look at our material blessings, at our relationships with family and friends, or at our moral character, and we assume we are doing fine. We forget that these are gifts from God that we receive by grace.

Israel was reminded that when they arrived in the promised land, they needed to make

work of remembering God. God warned that if they did not actively honor the Lord for his gifts, they would soon forget the Giver.

I read once that most divorces occur not because of an affair or a spouse's violence but because of apathy—a husband or wife simply begins to take the other for granted. Something similar can happen in our relationship with God. Our God wants us to know where our blessings come from—and especially the gift of our relationship with him in Christ. Do you remember?

Gracious God, you have given us so much—and as if that were not enough, in Christ you offer forgiveness of sins and eternal life with you! Help us to remember and praise you. Amen.

WANDERING FROM THE TRUTH

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have departed from the truth.
—2 Timothy 2:17-18

A recent blog I read celebrated the idea of a “never-ending vacation.” Faced with the prospects of an unfulfilling job and the constant demands of everyday life, many people dream of “leaving it all behind” and heading for a place with no responsibilities.

While it can be good to have a change of pace in life, the temptation to run away from all our responsibilities will lead to trouble and will damage the relationships in our lives.

In 2 Timothy 2 the apostle Paul mentions two individuals who ran away from home spiritually. Apparently they got caught up in false teachings about the resurrection and undermined the hope that believers had in Christ. The false teachers painted a picture that misled people to wander from the good news of Jesus—that we are saved by grace through

faith in Christ, who died for our sins and rose again so that we can live forever with him.

No matter how much we might enjoy learning new things in life, we need the “solid foundation” of truth that we can depend on to provide us with our spiritual home. We need a place where we are known and accepted in grace. And that’s what God gives us in Christ.

Let’s be careful about the stories we tell and the “chatter” we might engage in. In all that we say and do, we should ask ourselves, “Does it point people to Christ?”

Lord, keep us on the firm foundation of the gospel so that we don’t wander from you. Amen.

LEAVING THE STRAIGHT WAY

They have left the straight way and wandered off. . .

—2 Peter 2:15

For the past fifteen years I have lived in the northeastern United States, where roads often meander all over the landscape. Make a wrong turn, and you often discover that it can take a long time to find your way back to the right path. I'm thankful for the map program in my cell phone!

Peter describes the false teachers of his day as people who have gone off in the wrong direction. What leads people off course? Peter mentions the attractions of pleasure, greed, pride, lust, and the promise of false freedoms. All of these things and more lead us on meandering paths that can quickly bring us away from where God would have us go.

The “wages of wickedness” can also be appealing. Balaam was an example of someone who thought sin could offer a shortcut to a good life (see Numbers

22). But that wouldn't work, and Balaam had to be rebuked by his donkey before he could see the truth! In a similar way, we might think a financial scheme will get us what we want. And when we realize we have gone wrong, we may well have caused many people lots of harm and damage.

God invites us to embrace Christ as our Lord and Savior—the one who directs us and saves us from our wrong turns. Follow him, and let him keep you on the way!

Lord, we have a hard time sticking with your directions for our lives. By your Spirit, keep us on the right path, and lead us home with you. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.

WHO ARE YOU FOLLOWING?

"What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me?"
—Jeremiah 2:5

One hazard of technology today is the temptation to scroll aimlessly on social media or web feeds. Maybe we begin by looking for a recipe, but our search turns up a distracting new diet program, or we see a juicy update on a friend we haven't seen in years—and before we know it, we've spent an hour wandering around the internet without a clear sense of direction.

Something similar can happen in our spiritual lives. Sin rarely captures us out of the blue. Instead, we begin small—with a little lie, or a grudge we can't let go of, or a few too many drinks—and later we discover we have wandered far into places we never thought we would go.

The prophets reminded God's people Israel that they had wandered from God's way. They had followed idols—rep-

resenting the sinful desires of the human heart—rather than walking with the Lord and obeying his directions. They stopped asking, "Where is God in our lives?" They turned away from the living water and dug cisterns that only ran dry.

When Jesus came, he declared that he is the "living water" who fills us with his guiding Spirit (John 7:37). Rather than scrolling aimlessly through life, let's follow this Savior to keep close to God.

Lord, sometimes we don't realize when or how far we stray from you. Guide us by your Spirit, we pray. Lead us to worthwhile endeavors that honor you, through Christ. Amen.

JUST PLAIN TIRED

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

—1 Kings 19:3

What makes us run away?

By all accounts, Elijah had just finished a successful revival. The false prophets of Baal had been routed, and the people of Israel had proclaimed their allegiance to the true God. God had answered Elijah's prayers for an end to a crippling drought (1 Kings 18). But instead of resting confidently in the Lord, who had brought about all these good things, Elijah ran away. Why?

Sometimes we are just too worn out to stay where we are. Even our moments of success can be clouded by opposition and fear, and it can seem easier to run away. Maybe you're overwhelmed by the uncertainties of life, or you feel unable to cope for another day with a difficult relationship. Or maybe you're just plain tired and you think that being elsewhere—physically or spiritu-

ally—will fix things. But when we run from our challenges, we often miss the lessons God wants us to learn—about ourselves and his care.

Thankfully for us, God is willing to meet us when we run away. He came to Elijah with a gracious question: "What are you doing here?" And God responded to Elijah's hurt and fear with a promise of his presence and ongoing work.

By coming to us in Christ, God has done even more. When you're worn out and tempted to run away, let the presence of Christ lead you back home to rest in him.

"Precious Lord, take my hand . . . I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. . . . Guide my feet, hold my hand . . . lead me home." In Christ, Amen.

LOST BIRDS

Like a bird that flees its nest is anyone who flees from home.

—Proverbs 27:8

For several years, birds have built nests on or near our home. One year we watched robins hatch on the ledge outside our kitchen window. The mother robin could see us through the glass, and at first she was wary of every move we made. But she grew used to our presence, and we could watch how she tended her young. The nest, for them, was a safe place, warm and protected from predators until the chicks were ready to fly.

In a similar way, we need churches and families to serve as spiritual homes, protecting us and providing for our needs so that we can be prepared to face the world God has given us to live and work in. Unfortunately, we sometimes try to go our own way before we are ready. We make foolish choices in friendships, and we may get into trouble

with the law. We rush intimacy and find ourselves in a romantic relationship before we are ready. We imagine that we are spiritually mature, not needing Christian community, but then we find (too late) that we are unprepared for moral challenges that the world can throw at us.

Home is a place to cultivate the habits that bring us close to God: Scripture reading, prayer, mutual accountability, and confession of sin. We all need the protection and provision of Christ. Let's not take for granted the gift of a spiritual home.

Savior God, you long to gather your children as a hen gathers her young under her wings (Luke 13:34). Guide us to value your care and the gift of a spiritual home. Amen.

HE CAME TO HIS SENSES

"I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." —Luke 15:18

As a pastor, I often talk with parents who are disappointed that their son or daughter no longer thinks Christ is important. I always try to assure them that it is never too late for someone to return to God and his people.

Jesus tells a story about a son who ran away from home. Rather than work with his father on the family estate, the son demanded his inheritance and then wasted it on wild living. It probably seemed like an attractive idea at the time, but like many of our sinful decisions, it led to personal disaster.

When his money was all gone, the young man wound up working with pigs—"unclean" animals that were detestable to Jews. And as he "came to his senses," he asked himself, in effect, "How did I get here?"

We might find ourselves asking the same question, having drifted far away from our Father. Repentance is the first step we take to return. And while we do not have the power to restore our relationship with God on our own, our Father promises to receive us back when we come with a repentant heart.

If you find yourself far from the Father, he invites you to come back to him today. Repent and return, and God will welcome you home.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace and mercy in Christ. Keep us from wandering from your care. Give us the courage to return to you, knowing that you will *run* to welcome us home. Amen.

THE BEGINNING OF THE ROAD BACK

She left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

—Ruth 1:7

What happens when you realize you're far from home?

Naomi had been away from Bethlehem in the land of Judah for a long time. She and her husband had moved to Moab because of a famine, and their sons had grown up there and married. Naomi also experienced deep grief when her husband and then later her sons died.

Being a widow in those days was very difficult because a household depended on men to provide food, shelter, and support. So when Naomi heard that God had provided food in Bethlehem, she was motivated to go back there.

It can be interesting to see how God works in our lives. Wherever we go, God watches over us. And sometimes, in dire situations, we may be drawn to seek him in renewed ways. In this story, as we learn

later, God was drawing Naomi back to Judah because he had a special plan for her family. But Naomi didn't know that at the time.

Perhaps you're dealing with some kind of adversity. Maybe it's the death of a loved one, or the unexpected loss of a job. Maybe it's some kind of trouble you brought on yourself. Whatever the case, difficult situations can lead us to focus on the goodness of God and how he provides us a spiritual home for us.

Wherever we are, may God help us see that our true home can only be found in him, through the gift of Christ, his Son.

Father, wherever we are, help us to hear of your grace and to know that our home is with you. In Jesus, Amen.

FROM BITTERNESS TO HOPE

Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.
—Ruth 1:22

It is not always easy for people to return to their hometown. Old memories, past mistakes, and expectations can make things complicated.

Naomi returned from Moab full of disappointment and bitterness. For her, moving to Moab had brought death, loss, and heartache. And she reacted as many of us do: she blamed God for her troubles. Sometimes it's hard to see God's loving hand when we are faced with hardship.

As Naomi returned, however, she was not alone. Ruth, one of her daughters-in-law, had chosen to join her, saying, "Your people will be my people and your God my God." Ruth, an outsider, went to find a new home in Bethlehem—a place among people whose God she had known only from a distance (see v. 15).

As we see later in this story, God can redeem our emptiness just as he can accept our first steps toward him in faith. Though Naomi's outlook is bleak at this point, God's Word offers a glimpse of hope: the harvest is coming. God will make Bethlehem a place of blessing. And the wonders God works there will bless Naomi and Ruth—and eventually the whole world. Many years later, a descendant of their family would become the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ (see Matthew 1). God promises to bring blessing to all who find their home in Jesus. Shall we take that step toward him today?

Lord, help us to see beyond our bitter struggles to the promises we have in you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

GOD PROVIDES A HOME

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.

—Ruth 4:13

Ruth had returned with Naomi to make a new home in Bethlehem. At least Naomi had memories of familiar people and places there. But Ruth had no connections to Bethlehem at all. As a foreigner, she was doubly vulnerable in this place that was new to her.

But God provided in remarkable ways. First, “as it turned out” (Ruth 2:3), she found herself gleaning grain in the field of a kind-hearted relative named Boaz. Second, Boaz takes an interest in Ruth’s long-term well-being by making her his wife. These may seem like coincidences, but God specializes in gracious coincidence.

Sometimes our own journeys—to familiar places or to new ones—seem to present unlikely prospects. Maybe you can’t imagine going back to a church because you were too deeply hurt by its members in

the past. Or maybe you feel that your sins are too weighty to be forgiven. But please know that God forgives all of our sins through Jesus Christ.

God has a way of providing for people who may not seem to belong. The genealogy at the end of Ruth 4 shows that Ruth became an ancestor of Israel’s great king David—and therefore also of the Savior, Jesus (Matthew 1).

God can bring you into Jesus’ family too. Trust him today to give you the home you need.

Heavenly Father, you surprise us with your gracious acceptance and provision. Thank you for welcoming us into your family through Christ, and help us to rejoice in your protection and redemption. Amen.

LET'S GO BACK!

"Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah. . . ."
—Ezra 1:3

For many of us today, "home" may not be where we live but where we have roots or a family history. Perhaps it's where you grew up, or maybe it's the country your family emigrated from. Having been formed by that "home," it can be exciting to have an opportunity to go back.

The Jews had spent several generations in exile, far away from their ancestral home. While some had grown accustomed to their new place, memories and stories of Jerusalem continued to tug at the hearts of others. So when an opportunity came through a decree of the ruling king, they responded with enthusiasm and said to one another, "Let's go back!"

Similar things can happen at times in our spiritual lives. If we are living far away from God, we can grow comfortable with a secular lifestyle. We can

get used to doing as we see fit, and we can make poor decisions that lead us into danger or even ruin. But God's Spirit continues to nudge our hearts, reminding us that we are made for worship and relationship with the one true God.

In Jesus, God has issued the decree that allows wandering and wayward souls to return to fellowship with him. He moves our hearts and provides the circumstances (vv. 5-6) to return to him. If you have become distant from God, why not turn back and be restored to him today?

Holy Spirit, thank you for tugging at our hearts and urging us to return to you. Help us to turn back and be restored in Christ today. Amen.

KNOWING WHERE YOU BELONG

These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles . . . (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to their own town . . .).
—Ezra 2:1

In between the verses of our Bible reading today there is a long list of names. Genealogies and other lists like this do not usually make for interesting reading. After all, we know very little about most of the people listed there. Their actions, hopes, and dreams—all of that is lost to history, and we have only their names.

But the Bible includes this list because it would help later generations see how they were connected to the exiles and had a place among God's people in history. Similarly today, many people have found it meaningful to trace their family tree and learn things about their ancestry that they had never known before. It can help people learn about their identity and even some of the places their ancestors come from.

One of the great pictures of salvation in the Bible is that we now belong to the family of God. If you put your faith in Christ, you are adopted as a child of God (see Romans 8:14-17; Ephesians 2:19-22). This is good news for everyone! It can also give comfort to anyone who may feel that their past actions have burned bridges with the people around them, or whose families reject their faith in Christ. In Jesus, God has given us a place to belong and a people to belong to.

Heavenly Father, the whole family of Christ finds its identity in you. Thank you for the assurance that you love and care for each one of us, and that we belong to you. Amen.

BITTERSWEET HOMECOMING

No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise.

—Ezra 3:13

When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, one of their first tasks was to rebuild the temple so that the worship of God could be restored. The text emphasizes the community's excitement about this project, and their gratitude to God for bringing them home again. The people gave sacrificially for the work.

But we are also told that many of the older people wept. They had seen the glory of the former temple and did not think that this new one would be as glorious (see Haggai 2:2-9).

Joy and regret sometimes go together. When we look back in life and see that we should have acted differently or made different decisions, we can see with sadness the effects of our sins on the people around us. And sometimes we only understand the full weight of our

wrongdoing after God restores us and welcomes us back to himself.

The tears of the older exiles did not signal a disappointment with God. Those tears reflected an awareness of how much the nation's sins had cost. The old temple had been ruined because the people had rebelled against God.

Yet the people recalled another key truth: "[The Lord] is good; his love . . . endures forever" (v. 11). In Christ, every sin is removed and every tear is wiped away so that what remains is only the joy of salvation.

Lord God, give us godly sorrow for the effects of sin in and around us. But also give us joy, we pray, in the glory of your gift to us in Jesus. Amen.

UNWELCOME

The peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. —Ezra 4:4

The “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” had a long and complex history of opposition to God’s people (see 2 Kings 17). Despite what may have seemed to be friendly overtures, it was clear to the Jewish leaders that their enemies’ intention was not really to foster a good relationship with the exiles who had come back to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem. Instead, the enemies made every effort to frustrate the plans of rebuilding the temple and restoring community life.

The church has long taught that the world, the devil, and even our own flesh will fight against us. Even good, God-honoring decisions may not be affirmed and welcomed by the people around us. So we need to resist discouragement, temptation, and fear, and we

need to focus on growing our relationship with God.

The Bible reminds us that we have a Savior who “endured . . . opposition from sinners” and that we should focus “our eyes on Jesus” so that we will “not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:2-3).

The world may not welcome our return to Christ and our attempts to build up God’s kingdom, but our Lord and Savior will always welcome us home and strengthen us to keep working.

When people around us despise and forsake us, Lord, help us to come to you in prayer. May we remember “what a friend we have in Jesus.” Guide us and help us to serve you faithfully for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

UNEXPECTED SUPPORT

Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.
—Ezra 6:7

For several years, the rebuilding of the temple stalled while the Jewish people faced opposition from their neighbors. These opponents threatened God's people and called on the king of Persia (who controlled the area) to stop this work. But then something unexpected happened: instead of stopping the work, the king confirmed that a decree had been issued to rebuild the temple, and he told the enemies of the Jews to back off—and even to support the work instead! Sometimes God provides support from unexpected sources to keep his work going in this world.

In our personal and spiritual lives, we may find unexpected support at times too. Teachers and coaches may show us grace even if we have let them down. Employers may support us generously through a family crisis. A spouse may show deep

and forgiving commitment to their partner who has been unfaithful. Through actions like these we gain glimpses of the mercy and care of God.

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The gracious love of the holy God is an unexpected gift. But God not only welcomes us back to himself for Jesus' sake; his Spirit also works through people and systems—even kings and governments—to remind us how to live and to do what is right. What a cause for joy!

Spirit of God, thank you for the work you do through others to build us up and draw us closer to being at home with you. Help us to share your grace too. Amen.

BROUGHT BACK BY GOD'S MERCY

Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—those he . . . gathered from . . . east and west, from north and south.

—Psalm 107:2-3

There are many ways to leave home or to be away from home, and we can do that for lots of reasons. Sometimes we may travel by choice, and other times we may have little or no choice at all in the matter.

But there is only one way to return or to find a new home—and that is by the mercy of God.

Psalm 107 recalls some of the stories of God's people whom he rescued and brought back again. Though we may lose direction in different ways—perhaps our lives seem like a trackless wilderness (v. 4), or like a literal or figurative prison sentence (v. 10)—the story of redemption is the same: God's people cry out for help (vv. 6, 13), and God honors the cries of those who turn to him for salvation (vv. 6-7, 13-14). The story is repeated throughout

this psalm: God has brought us back, and we are thankful for his deliverance (vv. 8-9, 15-16, 21, 31).

Today, we who know about Christ's finished work for us have all the more reason to celebrate God's mighty acts for his people. No matter how we may have wandered away in our spiritual lives, we know that God has redeemed us completely through his Son, Jesus Christ. Let our story be added today to those whom God has redeemed.

Father, thank you for your unfailing love and your amazing rescue. We cry out to you, Lord, and, finding our salvation in Jesus, give you thanks in his name. Amen.

A PLACE FOR YOU

"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?"
—John 14:2

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." These words from the American poet Robert Frost express something of the deep human desire for a place to belong. Whether it's out of obligation or—even better—because of others' love for us, we long for a place where we are welcomed, known, cared for, and embraced.

Does such a place really exist? In this world, every home we make for ourselves, no matter how sweet it may feel, will always fall short. Sin and death bring an end to our earthly comfort, and even the best places in this life offer only a glimpse or a foretaste of full life with God in his presence.

Jesus has promised something remarkable to all who trust in him. Even as he faced his

own death for our sin, Jesus offered the hope of eternal life with God to all who will follow him. He promised to lead believers to the Father and to prepare a place for redeemed sinners longing to be at home with God.

Our Savior doesn't merely tantalize us with the offer of a perfect home; he assures us that his word is true. Believe his promise and trust in his grace to prepare you for the place where your Father will certainly take you in.

Lord Jesus, help us to trust in you. We believe in God; may we also believe in you and in the power of your finished work for us. Prepare our hearts for our home with the Father and with you. Amen.

SOLID HOMES, NOT TENTS

We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.
—2 Corinthians 5:1

Over the years, my family has often gone camping in tents, and we have many fun memories from those trips. We have also collected some stories about how camping in tents is very different from staying in your own home. Experiences with torrential rain and high winds leave us thankful that we can return to our solid, well-built house at the end of our trip.

Our Bible reading today notes that our life on earth is like living in a tent compared with the home God has prepared for us in heaven. Though we can enjoy lots of good times on our earthly journey, we also struggle with the realities of sin and weakness. We suffer hurt and disappointment. We give in to temptation, and we hurt the people we love. Our bodies grow old, and our abilities weaken.

When we struggle with such things, God's Spirit reminds us that we are made for something more. We live our lives before the face of God, in the hope of being made new in Christ. Even in our weakest moments we can live with confidence because we are looking forward to a permanent home provided by God.

Ask God's Spirit today to open your eyes to the hope and confidence of the home you are promised in Christ.

Father, you made us for your glory, and we are restless until we rest in you. When we groan in our weakness, fill us with the hope of our promised home with you, through Christ. Amen.

THE PROMISED HOMECOMING

"I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place."
—Jeremiah 29:10

Jeremiah sent this message from God to the people of Jerusalem who were exiled in Babylon. The people had sinned against God for many years, so the Lord had sent the king of Babylon to conquer them and take them away. Some were optimistic that their exile would be temporary, but God said the exile would last for seventy years, which for many would be a lifetime.

Sometimes a crisis in our lives can seem like a time of exile. When will things go back to normal again? When our health returns, when our relationships are mended, when our temptations have passed, when our injustices are addressed. . . . But what if God lets this go on for a lifetime?

I imagine that the recipients of Jeremiah's letter were not excited by what it said. Seventy years meant that most of them

would not be able to go back to enjoy the good things they had before. Yet God called them to live *as if* they were at home in the place where they were now living. God urged them to trust that he could extend his saving work and build his kingdom through them even in their current situation.

As God's people adapt and seek to live for him in the new situations where they find themselves, they grow to see more of God's character. His plan is to give us hope and a future—and he does that through the finished work of Christ.

Father, help us to live with hope and confidence as we await your coming kingdom. Thank you for your good plans for us in Christ. Amen.

MAKING HIS HOME WITH US

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

—John 1:14

In the beginning, humanity had a beautiful home created by God for his creatures to flourish in. Adam and Eve were able to meet with God and walk with him “in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8), and they enjoyed perfect companionship with their Creator. But then they fell into sin, turning their backs on God’s way, and they were banished from their home in God’s garden.

Ever since then, humanity has been seeking ways to return. For many of us, our natural default is to imagine that we can find our own way back, that we can seek God on our own terms. If we are just good enough, or smart enough, or perhaps just better than the next person, then maybe we can make it home—or so we think.

The good-news message of the Bible explains, however, that

even though our seeking after God is fruitless, God reaches out in grace and love to us. Though we live in the depths of darkness because of sin and death, the power of God’s light shines into our lives, giving us new hope in the coming of Christ.

In Jesus, “the Word . . . made his dwelling among us.” We could not find our way home to God, but, in Jesus, God has made his home with us so that we can be saved and live fully with him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for seeking us out when we could not find our way to you. In your mercy, prepare our hearts to receive you as you live among us and guide us by your Spirit. Amen.

AT HOME WITH GOD

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them."
—Revelation 21:3

It was the end of a long trip. We had moved to a new home a few months before, and we had still been settling in when we left. The time away had been good, with some exciting adventures but also with some difficulties. But as we drove back into town, we commented that we felt like we were coming home in a new way.

Similarly, we go through periods of change in our walk with God. Sometimes we face changes because we are following God faithfully into new and challenging places. Other times we face changes because in our wandering and sin we have turned away or distanced ourselves from God. Either way, we recognize that we are in unfamiliar territory.

But then, by God's grace, we return—and we discover that home is a gift. The Bible clearly presents our spiritual home

with God as something we cannot achieve by our own efforts. Instead, we find ourselves at home when God comes to us. This happened when Christ came into the world to bring us salvation. It happens today through the work of Christ's Spirit in our hearts. And it will happen again at the end of history when the Lord returns to make his home with us forever. God will bring heaven to us, to wipe away all the signs of our homelessness. May we praise his name and rest in his gift to us each day.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help us to look forward to the day when all the comforts of your home are ours by grace, and we will live with you forever. Amen.



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