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About 500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the Jewish people began to make their way home again....making the long journey back to Jerusalem from Babylon, where they had been held captive for 70 years. They had gone through a series of deportations and exiles, beginning around the year 605. God's chosen people return home to find a scene of utter devastation waiting for them.

Under repeated sieges by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, the city had finally fallen in the year 586. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the city wall, most of the houses of the city's citizens and , most devastatingly, the Temple itself. Finally Nebuchadnezzar took the king of Judah and put his eyes out in front of everybody and carried the blinded king off to Babylon. The destruction was total, not only physically but spiritually...as the Temple was at the very heart of the lives of the Jewish people. Its destruction was their destruction.

When Cyrus the Great of Persia decreed in 538 BCE that the Jewish people were free to come home, the exiled people returned to find the devastation just as they had left it 70 years before. Still deep in grief and lost amidst the rubble of their own home city, the exiles stand at the heap of stones that had once been the very heart of their lives...the great Temple of Solomon, which had contained the Ark of the Covenant, which had housed the Holy of Holies for their priests to commune with the most high God, which had been where their sons had been circumcised according to the law of Moses, where they had offered sacrifice upon sacrifice to God, where they had fasted and prayed and worshiped. All destroyed. All gone.

Where do you begin, when faced with a scene of such destruction? It is like the footage we see on TV...it's like what we saw the day after the tornado in Parkersburg or the hurricane in New Orleans....where do you begin? How do you begin? How do you piece your life back together when it is lying in ruins at your very feet?

I have never experienced the destruction of my home due to natural disaster or fire, but some here today have. Some know full well how God's chosen people felt that day, to see their lives reduced to a pile of rubble. I cannot imagine what that's like.

But there is the other sort of devastation that we all might be able to relate to, if we are honest with ourselves, and that is the spiritual sort. That is the part that was most crippling for the Jews upon their return to Jerusalem, to see their Temple lying in ruins. This might be a destruction more, if not most, people can relate to...times in life when all that you have worked so hard for, all that you have labored for, all that you had prayed for, crumbles right before your very eyes.

And that is a sadness that defies description. That is the sadness that is a violent kick in the gut, a sadness that robs you of sleep and appetite, a sadness that changes the very appearance of your face. And you are forced to confront this tough question—how do I begin to piece my life back together?

Into this deep sadness comes the prophet Isaiah, and his words rocket into this destroyed land like fill these destroyed people with brand new hope...Isaiah preaches to his lovely people and tells them this:

God will give you the strength to rebuild. Look what God has already done for you...he has brought you home again! God will have your back. Stop fasting and sacrificing. Those days are over, never to return. This is a new time, a new day. It is the dawn of a new era, when God's people return, not as a defeated people, but as a triumphant one! Long ago, God gave your ancestors the strength and the courage to build on this spot for the very first time. And now, today, God will fill you with strength to build again. The place might be destroyed, but your hope is not destroyed. A place can be rebuilt, stronger than before. Your hope is flickering, but it is not extinguished, O people of God! God will walk with you, just as he walked with your ancestors before you. Whatever it is that humans have managed to destroy, God will restore twice as strong.

Now, says Isaiah to his beloved people, get going and pick up the first brick.