

# THE STORY

FINDING YOUR STORY IN GOD'S STORY.

## *Synopsis & Context – Session #19 The Return Home*

After generations of idolatry, God's people had been defeated by the empires that controlled the ancient world. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom, deported the people, and re-populated the land with exiles from other countries. Their practice was to redistribute people from conquered nations throughout their vast empire. The foreigners who were resettled in northern Israel intermarried with the few remaining Jews and became the half-breed Samaritans.

The Babylonians were next on the world scene. After each of their three conquests of the Southern Kingdom, the Babylonians deported Jewish captives to enclaves in Babylon and sought to assimilate them into their culture. Now, 70 years of captivity had elapsed. Kings and kingdoms rise / fall; world empires come / go.

The next world power, Persia, was more benevolent. They preferred the benefits of high taxation and the favor of the various gods. So King Cyrus issued a decree to repatriate all aliens to their homelands while allowing them some degree of self-rule. And thus the people of Israel began their journey home.

Under the guidance of the Hebrew leader, Zerubbabel, nearly 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem. They were intent on rebuilding, and the temple was the first priority. They rebuilt the altar and prepared sacrifices in accordance with the Law of Moses. Fifty years had passed since the temple had been torn down by the Babylonians, and at last God's people were again able to worship as God had instructed. The foundation of this humble temple could not compare to the magnificence of its predecessor, but the process had begun, and God was leading the way.

The locals didn't necessarily roll out the welcome wagon for the repatriated Judeans. They made a backhanded offer of help as an attempt to sabotage the temple rebuilding project. Zerubbabel didn't fall for their scheme, but the Jews were intimidated and construction halted.

Sixteen years later the prophet, Haggai, spoke on God's behalf. He twice urged his people, "Give careful thought to your ways." He reminded them that the temple had to be built as a place of honor and glory for God. The LORD encouraged His people and they returned to their work. Though the new temple would not have the splendor of the old one, God promised that His glory would return. Zechariah agreed; Jerusalem would again teem with life and prosperity and the people would live righteously. God promised to shower Jerusalem and Judah with His goodness and make Israel a blessing to the world.

When the building resumed, a new antagonist, Tattenai, wrote to King Darius hoping to obstruct progress. Darius searched the royal archives and discovered that his predecessor, King Cyrus, had given his royal thumbs up to the rebuilding of God's temple. In a fitting twist of events, Darius penned a letter back to Tattenai charging him with responsibility for funding the temple reconstruction. The plot backfired, and in 516 B.C., the temple was completed.

It had been 70 years since the people were first taken captive. This long and painful season of discipline brought much needed change to the hearts of God's people. In the Lower Story, God brought them out of captivity again. He returned them to the Land of Promise where they rebuilt His temple and their lives.

But the Upper Story once again rings with echoes of delivery from bondage. The LORD had redeemed His people from foreign captivity as God's great, over-arching plan continued unabated. Like Israel, we wait in joyful anticipation of our journey to a land of eternal promise (Heb. 11:16) where all things are new and home will be forever.



**Chapter #19: *The Return Home* is 'woven' from selections from *the Books of the Prophets Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah***

Ezra 1—6; Haggai 1—2; Zechariah 1, 8

*Plot Points for Chapter 19: The Return Home*

The sovereign Lord can move the heart of an emperor to accomplish his purposes. The Lord's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness should never be doubted, and his prophecies always come to pass. God's people will always face opposition in achieving a worthwhile task, but they can rely on the Lord to see them through as they faithfully labor.

The Lord himself had used Babylon to destroy his temple. He had wielded the armies of that empire like a weapon of war (see Jer. 21:4–5). But now God was leading his people home. He was bringing them back to rebuild the temple.

Notice how little God's people actually had to do to make the rebuilding of the temple happen. God influenced pagan kings to provide all the supplies that were needed. In addition, these foreign rulers not only provided materials but protection as well.

The Lord asked his people for only one thing: to remain faithful in the work. Israel was called to pray, worship, and labor faithfully—and God would take care of the rest. But like so many times before, this proved too difficult for them. They faced opposition from without and apathy from within and failed to obey God's directions yet again. As he had in the past, the Lord sent prophets once again to spur the people forward.

The moving story of the exiles' return is punctuated most poignantly when the foundation of the temple is laid. While the younger generation cheered, the older ones wept, recognizing just how meager the new footprint of the temple really was. Compared to the former glory and magnificence of Solomon's temple, it was a mere shadow of the past. This reminds us of another theme in God's story: until the Lord himself returns, everything we build will be marked by the brokenness of this fallen world! But when he returns, the true temple will be revealed and God's work seen in its true beauty.

*Cf. Barr, Adam Exploring the Story: A Reference Companion (Story, The). Zondervan.*

**God's Story – YOUR story!**

- **In this section of *The Story*, how would you characterize God? How does God appear to the people?**
- **When the temple was re-established, some were overjoyed, and some were heart-broken. Many churches go through periods of growth, reconstruction and challenge. How should we respond when mixed feelings pull us in opposite directions?**
- **As the People of God return 'home,' what would you describe the differences *within* the people to be? How are they "the same."?**
- **What is it that you need in order to press-on toward a goal, even when facing opposition?**