GATHERED AS *ONE*

unit 17 | session 1

CHRIST CONNECTION

God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile from Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve's first sin, all humans have been exiled from God and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship God.

RETURNING HOME

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to dig in and read all of the content on this timeline.

Ezra 1–3

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISES

EZRA 1:1-8

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken through
Jeremiah, the LORD roused the spirit of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire
kingdom and to put it in writing: 2 This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The LORD, the God
of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him
a house at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and
may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God
who is in Jerusalem. 4 Let every survivor, wherever he resides, be assisted by the men of that
region with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God
in Jerusalem." 5 So the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—
everyone whose spirit God had roused—prepared to go up and rebuild the LORD's house in
Jerusalem. 6 All their neighbors supported them with silver articles, gold, goods, livestock, and
valuables, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering. 7 King Cyrus also brought out
the articles of the LORD's house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had placed
in the house of his gods. 8 King Cyrus of Persia had them brought out under the supervision of
Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

GOD RESTORES BROKENNESS

EZRA 3:1-6,10-13

1 When the seventh month arrived, and the Israelites were in their towns, the people gathered as
one in Jerusalem. 2 Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests along with Zerubbabel
son of Shealtiel and his brothers began to build the altar of Israel's God in order to offer burnt
offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. 3 They set up the altar
on its foundation and offered burnt offerings for the morning and evening on it to the LORD
even though they feared the surrounding peoples. 4 They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as
prescribed, and offered burnt offerings each day, based on the number specified by ordinance
for each festival day. 5 After that, they offered the regular burnt offering and the offerings for
the beginning of each month and for all the LORD's appointed holy occasions, as well as the
freewill offerings brought to the LORD. 6 On the first day of the seventh month they began to
offer burnt offerings to the LORD, even though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet
been laid. . . . 10 When the builders had laid the foundation of the LORD's temple, the priests,
dressed in their robes and holding trumpets, and the Levites descended from Asaph, holding
cymbals, took their positions to praise the LORD, as King David of Israel had instructed. 11 They
sang with praise and thanksgiving to the LORD: "For he is good; his faithful love to Israel endures
forever." Then all the people gave a great shout of praise to the because the foundation of the
LORD's house had been laid. 12 But many of the older priests, Levites, and family heads, who had
seen the first temple, wept loudly when they saw the foundation of this temple, but many others
shouted joyfully. 13 The people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shouting from that
of the weeping, because the people were shouting so loudly. And the sound was heard far away.

MAIN POINT.

God meets us in our brokenness and restores us.

THEOLOGY *CONNECTION*

COOPERATION

Members of New Testament churches should work together in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and compassion ministries for the growth of Jesus's kingdom. Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common goals by various groups of Jesus's people.

DISCUSSION

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISES

EZRA 1:1-8

- **How did God work through unexpected people in this passage? How does He work through unexpected people today?**
- **Read Jeremiah 27:21-22. How did God fulfill His Word? What does this help you realize about Him?**
- **Read Jeremiah 29:10-14. Why do you think God chose to stir Cyrus's heart to fulfill this promise instead of releasing His people by some other way?**

GOD RESTORES BROKENNESS

EZRA 3:1-6,10-13

- **What did the people rebuild first? What do you think this symbolized for them? For us?**
- **Why do you think the older generation wept over the temple foundation while others rejoiced?**
- **What can we learn about community and worship through the people's actions?**

THE PEOPLE DIDN'T JUST RETURN "HOME;" THEY RETURNED TO GOD. HOW CAN WE TAKE SIMILAR STEPS TO RETURN WHEN WE'VE SINNED AND TURNED AWAY FROM GOD?

CULTURAL *CONNECTION*

How much does where you're from impact your identity? How much do your family, friends, and activities shape you? Do you ever wonder if you'd be the same person if you lived in a different place, with a different family, or in different circumstances? Considering how much external factors affect our identity helps us discover who we are. God formed Israel for Himself. Israel's identity was supposed to be in the Lord—in living distinctly from the rest of the world by following God's law. Instead, the people often ignored their God-given identity and chose to imitate pagan nations surrounding them. After living for seventy years exiled in Babylon, many of them may have struggled with their identity. If they were born in Babylon, were they Israelites still? Were they also Babylonian? Who were they, really? Maybe you've asked this question too. Here's the truth: God created you. He delights in you. You are your truest self when you live out your identity as God's child—as a follower of Jesus living by God's Word. Circumstances change, but your identity never does when you root it in the Lord.

DAY ONE

JEREMIAH 25:1-14

Our plans have this tendency to fall apart, don't they? From big plans to small, human beings don't truly have control over the way things go in life. In Jeremiah 25:1-14, God spoke through Jeremiah to lay out what the next seven decades would look like for the people of Israel. They had sinned—big time—and they were going to spend seventy years in exile from Israel as a consequence for their sin.

This probably wasn't how the Israelites had seen their lives going, but the Lord had a perfect plan the whole time. God planned for the people of Babylon to take over Israel, and He planned for Babylon to receive consequences for their sin as well. The future that the Lord laid out may have seemed a bleak, but God carried out His Word. In our first session on the book of Ezra, we learned about the Israelites' return from the very exile that God promised in this passage. Everything happened like God said it would!

When you think about your own life, the future may look a little scary. You might be worried that your plans will fall apart. The Lord has a greater plan for you, and for the world, and His plan always comes true. The Israelites probably weren't thrilled about the plan God had for them in the exile, but these consequences were ultimately for the good of the people. They would learn the devastating effects of sinning and turning away from the Lord. God was going to return them to their land and eventually bring ultimate redemption through His Son! What does this teach us? We can trust in the plans of the Lord and His providence over our lives.

- **WHEN WAS A TIME THAT YOUR PLANS FELL APART, BUT THINGS TURNED OUT BETTER THAN YOU HAD HOPED?**
- **HOW CAN YOU GROW IN YOUR TRUST FOR GOD'S PLANS FOR YOUR LIFE?**

PRAY

LORD, THANK YOU FOR ALWAYS HAVING THE PERFECT PLAN FOR THE WORLD AND ALLOWING US TO BE A PART OF THAT PLAN. HELP ME TO TRUST IN YOUR POWER AND YOUR PLANS FOR MY LIFE.

DAY TWO

JEREMIAH 29:10-14

Jeremiah 29:11 is a Bible verse that people use a lot today. You may see it at graduation parties or on signs in people's homes—and for good reason! It's a great verse! But it becomes even more meaningful when we understand the context in which it was written.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the people of Israel while they were in exile in Babylon. They were far from home, discouraged, and unsure about what their lives were going to look like from that point forward. The Lord spoke through Jeremiah to remind the people that the exile was not random but was a result of their sin and idolatry. God didn't leave the Israelites discouraged though; He explained that they would be able to return home and that He would restore their land. More than just their physical restoration, God promised that they would find the Lord and be heard by Him if they would only seek Him and cry out to Him.

God does have great plans for where we will live and what we will do, just like He did for the Israelites, but He has even more important plans for our hearts. When our sin requires consequences or we turn from following God, He keeps His promises and desires to bring us back to *Himself*. Even in the middle of sending the Israelites away because of their repeated disobedience towards Him, the Lord showed incredible mercy towards them and encouraged the people that the exile wouldn't last forever. Because we will sin and fall short of God's plans for us, the Lord will discipline us, but He will do so out of love. And He won't leave us there forever. God has good plans for us and hears our cries for help; He works to restore us to a right relationship with Him.

- **HOW DOES KNOWING THE CONTEXT OF JEREMIAH 29:11 CHANGE THE MEANING OF THE VERSE?**
- **WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT GOD'S CHARACTER FROM THIS PASSAGE?**

PRAY

LORD, HELP ME TO TRUST YOU EVEN IN TIMES OF DISCIPLINE BECAUSE YOU ALWAYS HAVE GOOD INTENTIONS FOR ME. HELP ME TO REPENT FROM SIN AND FOLLOW THE PLANS YOU HAVE FOR ME.

DAY THREE

HAGGAI 1:1-8

In the book of Haggai, some of the Israelites have been allowed to return to their homeland and were readjusting to life in Israel. Remember, they were exiled because they were worshiping other gods and continuously sinning against the Lord. They had returned, but their focus was still on other things besides God! The people focused on building their own homes and lives before rebuilding the temple where they were to worship God and make sacrifices for their sin.

God spoke through the prophet Haggai and commanded the people to begin rebuilding the temple right away. The people needed to make the Lord their first priority before making their own lives comfortable because He deserved their focus and their worship. The Israelites may not have been praying to idols like they were before the exile, but they were placing other things, like comfort, before God. Our idols don't tend to look like other gods or physical statues like in ancient Israel. But we fall prey to the same temptation as the Israelites in this passage—the temptation to put ourselves before the Lord. Maybe you give up your quiet time to have more time to study or to talk to your friends. Maybe you're trying to seek a path in life that will bring you the most comfort instead of what is most glorifying to the Lord. Some of these things aren't bad by themselves! Focusing on school or trying to be successful is good and can honor God. But if we're placing good things *before* worshiping and obeying God, then we have some changes to make. We have to get our priorities straight. The Lord is abundantly clear that He made us to glorify Him, and this should be the focus of our lives in everything we do.

- **WHAT ARE YOU PRIORITIZING OVER GLORIFYING GOD AND OVER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM?**
- **HOW CAN YOU REVOLVE YOUR LIFE AROUND WORSHIPING GOD INSTEAD OF MAKING IT A *PART* OF YOUR LIFE?**

PRAY

LORD, HELP ME TO REMEMBER THAT GLORIFYING YOU IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE. HELP ME TO GIVE UP THINGS THAT ARE DISTRACTING ME FROM YOU AND TO ALWAYS SET MY EYES ON YOU.

DAY FOUR

HEBREWS 10:1-10

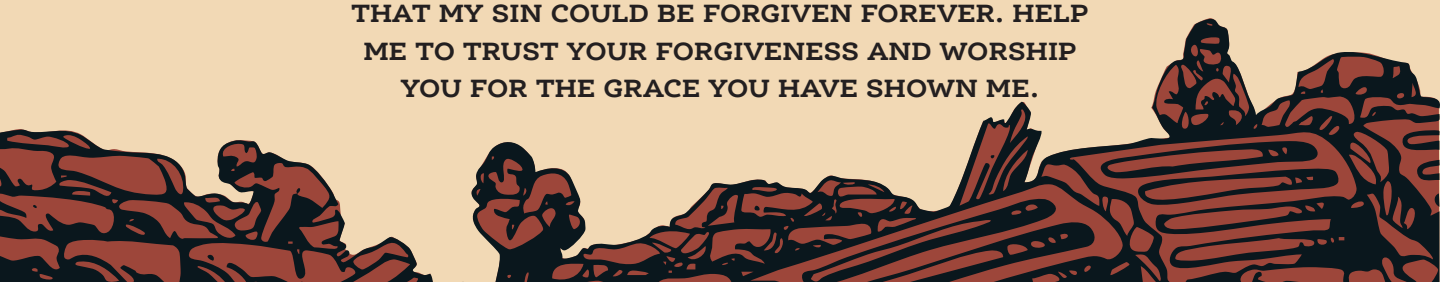
Have you ever had such a big mess in your house that you didn't know where to start cleaning? That feeling of chaos and being overwhelmed might be what the Israelites felt when they returned to a broken Jerusalem. The temple had been destroyed and rebuilding would require a lot of hard work. When we studied Ezra 3 at the beginning of this week, we read that the first thing the Israelites rebuilt was the altar—even before laying the foundation for the temple. This may seem out of order, but for these people living under the law God gave them through Moses, the ability to make sacrifices was the most important thing. Why? Sacrifices atoned for their sins, temporarily cleansing them and bringing them back into right relationship with God. For seventy years, after the temple was destroyed and the people were exiled, the people hadn't been able to make sacrifices for their sins. So, we can see why they needed to rebuild the altar before they even rebuilt the temple! The people wanted to worship in the way God commanded. They understood the impact of sin on their relationship with the Lord.

In Hebrews 10, we learn that animal sacrifices were never enough to truly cover *all* of the sins of the people. However, like the author of Hebrews explains, Christ's death on the cross acted as the *perfect*, *permanent* sacrifice for our sins. While the blood of animals was only able to atone for sin temporarily, Jesus's blood is able to atone for our sins forever. If you have placed your faith in Jesus, your sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ, and you have been brought into right relationship with the Lord.

- **WHAT DOES JESUS'S PERFECT AND PERMANENT SACRIFICE HELP YOU UNDERSTAND ABOUT YOUR STANDING WITH GOD, EVEN WHEN YOU STILL SIN?**
- **WHEN HAVE YOU FELT LIKE YOU NEEDED TO EARN GOD'S FORGIVENESS? WHY IS IT SOMETIMES HARD TO BELIEVE THAT JESUS'S DEATH WAS ENOUGH TO ATONE FOR US?**

PRAY

LORD, THANK YOU FOR SACRIFICING YOUR SON SO THAT MY SIN COULD BE FORGIVEN FOREVER. HELP ME TO TRUST YOUR FORGIVENESS AND WORSHIP YOU FOR THE GRACE YOU HAVE SHOWN ME.



DAY FIVE

HAGGAI 2:1-9

Earlier this week, we read about the building of the new temple's foundation. The people who had seen the first temple before it was destroyed were disappointed in what they saw being built; they were grieved because it didn't live up to the first one. In this passage, the Lord spoke through the prophet Haggai and told the people He knew they were disappointed in the new temple they were seeing. However, He called the people to be strong and to carry on their work because His Spirit was with them. More than that, the Lord promised that the glory to come in the future would be better than anything the people of Israel could ever imagine.

We might often be disappointed in the way things have turned out in our lives; we may not understand how the Lord is working. We might be tempted to think that He is doing a greater work in the lives of others or that we lack something—that God is withholding good things from us. However, as believers, our hope and joy are not in what we can see in this world. Our hope is in the second coming of Christ, in the promise that we will spend eternity in the presence of God. Even in times that you feel disappointed in this life, you can turn that over to the Lord and remind yourself of the perfect goodness you will experience for all eternity. In the new heavens and the new earth, we won't feel like we're lacking or compare ourselves to each other because we will have all that we could ever need in the Lord.

- **WHERE DO YOU FEEL DISAPPOINTMENT IN YOUR LIFE OR LIKE GOD IS WITHHOLDING SOMETHING FROM YOU?**
- **HOW CAN YOU REMIND YOURSELF OF THE HOPE YOU HAVE IN JESUS'S SECOND COMING?**

PRAY

LORD, THANK YOU FOR THE PROMISE I HAVE OF ETERNITY WITH YOU AND THE HOPE YOU BRING TO MY LIFE. HELP ME TO FLEE FROM COMPARISON OR DISAPPOINTMENT AND RUN TO THE JOY I CAN FIND ONLY IN YOU.