

God Brought His People Home

BIBLE PASSAGE: Ezra 1:1–2:2; 2:64–3:13

MAIN POINT: God changed the king's heart so the Israelites could go home.

KEY PASSAGE: Daniel 2:20-21

BIG PICTURE QUESTION: How can we obey God? We trust God to give us strength to obey Him.

SMALL GROUP OPENING
(10–15 MINUTES)

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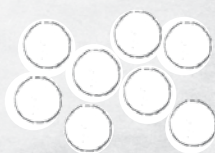
LARGE GROUP BIBLE STUDY
(25–30 MINUTES)

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SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES
(25–30 MINUTES)

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Leader BIBLE STUDY

God's people had been living in Babylon for 70 years. Some of God's people had died in Babylon. Some of their children and grandchildren were born in Babylon and grew up there. But Babylon was not their home.

Before the people of Judah were exiled, God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. These are the words of the Lord: "These nations will serve the king of Babylon for 70 years" (Jer. 25:11). Then the Lord said, "When 70 years for Babylon are complete, I will attend to you and will confirm My promise concerning you to restore you to this place" (Jer. 29:10). The time had come for God's people to go back home.

Cyrus, the king of the Persian empire, overthrew Babylon. Cyrus took over the kingdom, including the lands of Israel and Judah. In the following year, the Lord did something miraculous in Cyrus's heart. He prompted Cyrus to issue a decree: All the Jewish exiles are free to return to their ancestral homes.

The exile was over! God's people were free to return to their own land. They were free to live as God's special people. The first group of Judean exiles returned home under the leadership of Zerubbabel (zuh RUHB uh buhl). Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin, who had been taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. (See 2 Kings 24:8-13.)

Ezra 2:64-65 says nearly 50,000 people traveled back to Judah. When they got to Jerusalem, they began working to rebuild the temple that the Chaldeans had destroyed. (See 2 Chron. 36:19.)

Explain to kids that the temple was the place where God met with His people. Jesus came to earth to rescue God's people from sin. When Jesus returns, He will restore the earth and will dwell with His people forever.



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God Brought His People Home

Ezra 1:1–2:2; 2:64–3:13

Many years before God’s people were taken to Babylon, God promised the prophet Jeremiah that the exile would last 70 years; then God would bring His people back home. God always keeps His promises.

Cyrus, king of Persia, had taken over Babylon. God gave Cyrus an idea. Cyrus said, “Let all of God’s people go back to Jerusalem so they can rebuild the Lord’s temple. Give them gold and silver and animals. Give them gifts for God’s temple.”

The exile was over! God’s people were free to go back to their homes. God’s people got ready, and their neighbors gave them gifts—gold and silver and animals and other expensive things.

Zerubbabel (zuh RUHB uh buhl) **and the high priest led God’s people back to Judah.** They had been away for 70 years. Many of the people were born in Babylon; they had never seen the land God had given their parents and grandparents. In all, thousands of people went back to Judah. **They settled in their hometowns and set up their houses. Then the people met together in Jerusalem to rebuild the Lord’s temple.**

First, the priests rebuilt the altar in the same place it used to be. They followed all the laws of God for building. When the altar was finished, they offered burnt offerings to God. The people also obeyed the law about special celebrations. They had a festival like God had told them to do, and they made sacrifices to God.

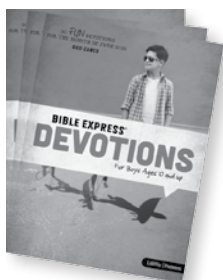
Then God’s people gave money to stonemasons and carpenters who would work on God’s temple. They paid

people to bring cedar logs to Jerusalem. Finally, when everything was ready, the people started to work. They laid the foundation of the temple. The foundation was important; it would make the building strong.

When the foundation was finished, the priests put on special clothes, and the people praised God. They sang, “The Lord is good. His faithful love will last forever.” Then the people shouted and praised God. They were so happy! The foundation of the temple was complete!

Not everyone was happy though. Some of the older people remembered what the temple had looked like 70 years ago, before it had been destroyed. They cried. The noise of the crying and shouting was so loud that the people could be heard far away.

Christ Connection: Zerubbabel led God’s people back to the temple to rebuild it. The temple was the place where God met with His people on earth. Jesus came to earth to rescue God’s people. One day, Jesus will return to restore a greater home for all of God’s people, and we will spend eternity with Him.



**WANT TO
DISCOVER
GOD’S WORD?
GET
BIBLE EXPRESS!**

Invite kids to check out this week’s devotionals to discover God told His people to obey Him or face exile. (Deut. 27:10) When they repented, God brought them home. Later God sent Jesus to bring us to Him. (1 Pet. 3:18) Order in bulk, subscribe quarterly, or purchase individually. For more information, check out www.lifeway.com/devotionals.

Small Group OPENING

SESSION TITLE: God Brought His People Home

BIBLE PASSAGE: Ezra 1:1–2:2; 2:64–3:13

MAIN POINT: God changed the king’s heart so the Israelites could go home.

KEY PASSAGE: Daniel 2:20-21

BIG PICTURE QUESTION: How can we obey God? We trust God to give us strength to obey Him.

Welcome time

Greet each kid as he or she arrives. Use this time to collect the offering, fill out attendance sheets, and help new kids connect to your group. Ask kids to think about some promises they have made or about a time someone promised them something.

Ask how they felt when the promise was kept or when the promise was broken.

SAY • In today’s Bible story, we will learn about a promise God made to bring His people home. Though the journey was hard and the people had many instructions to follow, God kept His promise. God always keeps His promises!

Activity page (5 minutes)

Invite kids to complete “Building Site” on the activity page. Kids should find and color all of the tools to discover a hidden word. (*temple*)

SAY • Today’s Bible story is about God’s people rebuilding the temple. Do you remember why the temple was torn down? How long do you think it took to rebuild the temple? We will find out soon!

- “Building Site” activity page, 1 per kid
- pencils or markers

Session starter (10 minutes)

OPTION 1: Rock, paper, scissors

Invite kids to pair up to play “Rock, Paper, Scissors.”

Instruct kids to play three rounds with their partner. The player who wins at least two rounds remains, but the other player must sit out. Tell players sitting out that they must count to 70 before rejoining the game.

Remaining players will pair up to play another three rounds. Each time, losing players will sit out and count to 70. Kids will rejoin and find a new partner to play with. After several minutes, call for kids to stop.

SAY • How did you feel when you had to sit out? Did it seem to take a long time to count to 70? Today we are going to hear a story about God’s people who were in exile for 70 years! They waited a long time for God to keep His promise to let them go home.

OPTION 2: Spot the differences

Display the Bible story picture. Ask kids to identify and describe things about the temple that are different than your church building.

Lead kids to talk about what materials might be needed to build the temple. Which part should be built first? Encourage kids to listen for these details in the Bible story.

SAY • The temple was a special place where God’s people gathered to worship in God’s presence. Because of Jesus, we no longer have to follow such strict rules when building our churches, but we still must obey God in other ways. *How can we obey God? We trust God to give us the strength to obey Him.*



• Bible Story Picture
Poster

Transition to large group

Large Group LEADER

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Countdown

• countdown video

Show the countdown video as your kids arrive, and set it to end as large group time begins.

Introduce the session (3 minutes)

• leader attire
• stool or chair
• photo album

[Large Group Leader enters, removes apron, and sits on a stool or chair in the middle of the stage. Open a photo album and flip through a few pages.]

LEADER • This album is full of my family’s memories. There are clippings from the newspaper from the day we opened our pizza parlor, love letters from when my grandfather and grandmother were dating, and even pictures of my great-great-Nonna—you know, the one whose secret recipes we use in this restaurant.

Oh, how I wish she could see this restaurant and eat our food! I never met her, of course. I’ve never even been to Italy where she’s from, but I’ve heard so many stories. She used to cook big pots of pasta and invite all her neighbors over. She’d bake extra loaves of bread and share them with hungry people in her community. She was always serving people.

I wish I could’ve known her and seen her and the way she loved people. I wish I could bring her here

and let her sit and relax and be the one eating instead of cooking for a change.

This book is full of memories and stories from the past. Some of these things happened decades ago—50, 60, and 70 years ago! Without this book, I wouldn't know they happened!

Today we are going to hear about a promise God's people remembered for 70 years while they were in exile. They must have talked about it often and told their children about it. Do you think God kept His promise? Let's find out.

Giant timeline (1 minute)

Point out previous stories on the giant timeline and show kids where today's Bible story, "God Brought His People Home," falls on the timeline.

• Giant Timeline or Big Story Circle

LEADER • Over the last few weeks, we have learned about Daniel and his friends and the way they obeyed God. Today we will continue learning about God's people, how they followed Him, and how He was faithful to keep the promises He made to them.

Big picture question (1 minute)

LEADER • Let's review our big picture question: *How can we obey God?* Does anyone remember the answer? [Allow kids to respond.] Right! *We trust God to give us strength to obey Him.*

• Bibles
• "God Brought His People Home" video
• Big Picture Question Poster
• Bible Story Picture Poster

Tell the Bible story (10 minutes)

Open your Bible to Ezra 1:1–2:2; 2:64–3:13. Tell the Bible story in your own words, or show the Bible story video "God Brought His People Home."

LEADER • There were so many feelings and emotions in this story! Some people were excited because they were getting to go home and celebrate God keeping His promises. Some people were nervous because they were traveling to a place they had never seen but had heard stories about for years and years. Other people were struggling because they had memories of how their home used to be, but it no longer looked the same.

In the middle of all this, God was at work caring for His people and writing His story. **God changed the king's heart so the Israelites could go home.** God kept His promise to His people to bring them home, and He gave them the strength to obey Him. The same is true for us, no matter what we feel or what we are asked to do, ***we trust God to give us strength to obey Him.***

Zerubbabel led God's people back to the temple to rebuild it. The temple was the place where God met with His people on earth. Jesus came to earth to rescue God's people. One day, Jesus will return to restore a greater home for all of God's people, and we will spend eternity with Him.

The Gospel: God's Plan for Me (optional)

Use Scripture and the guide provided with this session to explain to boys and girls how to become a Christian. Assign individuals to meet with kids who have more questions.

Encourage boys and girls to ask their parents, small group leaders, or other Christian adults any questions they may have about becoming a Christian.

Tip: Provide *I'm a Christian Now* for new Christians to take home and complete with their families.

Key passage (5 minutes)

Show the key passage poster. Lead the boys and girls to read together Daniel 2:20-21.

- Key Passage Poster
- “Name of God” song

LEADER • Many years ago, God spoke through His prophet Jeremiah. God told Jeremiah that the people of Israel would be exiled and serve another king for 70 years, but God also promised that He would bring His people home. [See *Jer. 25:11*.] God is good, and He always keeps His promises. He was faithful to His people even though it took many years.

Our key passage says that God is wise and powerful. God changes times and seasons. He removes kings and allows new kings to be in charge. He gives wisdom and understanding to His people. God is worthy of our praise! Let’s sing.

Lead boys and girls to sing “Name of God.”

Discussion starter video (4 minutes)

LEADER • God’s people must have been so excited to go home. Think about that and watch this.

Show the “Unit 16, Session 4” discussion starter video. Lead kids to discuss how they feel after returning home. What is comforting about their homes?

- “Unit 16, Session 4” discussion starter video

LEADER • **God changed the king’s heart so the Israelites could go home.** One day, Jesus will return to restore a greater home for all of God’s people, and we will spend eternity with Him. If you are a believer, this world is the worst you will get. God is good. He keeps His promises to us and has promised to give us a home with Him forever. What are some things about our permanent home are you excited about?

• “It Is Well” song

Sing (4 minutes)

LEADER • God is wise and powerful, and He is worthy of our praise. Today’s Bible story told us about the ways God’s people celebrated how God kept His promise to bring them home.

God keeps His promises to us, too. One of the greatest promises He made and kept was to send Jesus to rescue us from our sin. This promise is not only for us, but for all people; it is for anyone who responds to Jesus in repentance and faith. Let’s sing together and praise God for His wisdom, power, and faithfulness.

Sing together “It Is Well.”

Pray (2 minutes)

Invite kids to pray before dismissing to small groups.

LEADER • God, thank You for being perfectly good and holy. Thank You for always keeping Your promises—even good promises we don’t deserve!

We know we can trust You. Please give us strength to trust and obey You. Give us faith to trust in Jesus and tell others about this wonderful promise of salvation and forgiveness that You have made and kept. We love You. Amen.

Dismiss to small groups

The Gospel: God's Plan for Me

Ask kids if they have ever heard the word *gospel*. Clarify that the word *gospel* means “good news.” It is the message about Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation. Use the following guide to share the gospel with kids.



God rules. Explain to kids that the Bible tells us God created everything, and He is in charge of everything. Invite a volunteer to read Genesis 1:1 from the Bible. Read Revelation 4:11 or Colossians 1:16-17 aloud and explain what these verses mean.



We sinned. Tell kids that since the time of Adam and Eve, everyone has chosen to disobey God. (Romans 3:23) The Bible calls this sin. Because God is holy, God cannot be around sin. Sin separates us from God and deserves God's punishment of death. (Romans 6:23)



God provided. Choose a child to read John 3:16 aloud. Say that God sent His Son, Jesus, the perfect solution to our sin problem, to rescue us from the punishment we deserve. It's something we, as sinners, could never earn on our own. Jesus alone saves us. Read and explain Ephesians 2:8-9.



Jesus gives. Share with kids that Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again. Because Jesus gave up His life for us, we can be welcomed into God's family for eternity. This is the best gift ever! Read Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; or 1 Peter 3:18.



We respond. Tell kids that they can respond to Jesus. Read Romans 10:9-10,13. Review these aspects of our response: Believe in your heart that Jesus alone saves you through what He's already done on the cross. Repent, turning from self and sin to Jesus. Tell God and others that your faith is in Jesus.

Offer to talk with any child who is interested in responding to Jesus.

Small Group LEADER

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Key passage activity (5 minutes)

- Key Passage Poster
- dry erase board
- marker
- stopwatch (optional)

Play “Build a Church” to review the key passage. This game is similar to “Hangman.”

1. Draw four lines to form a square. (the church building)
2. Draw two lines to form a triangle. (the roof)
3. Draw two lines on the roof to form a cross.

One at a time, point to kids to say one word of the key passage, drawing a part of the church for each correct response. For incorrect responses, erase a line. Challenge kids to see how many “churches” they can build in five minutes.

SAY • Great work, everyone. Our key passage reminds us that God deserves to be praised. Today’s Bible story shows us another reason God deserves to be praised: God always keeps His promises! **God changed the king’s heart so the Israelites could go home.**

Bible story review & Bible skills (10 minutes)

- Bibles, 1 per kid
- Main Point Poster

Provide Bibles and guide kids to locate Ezra 1–3. Remind them that the Book of Ezra is in the Old Testament. Invite a volunteer to identify which book comes before Ezra.

(2 *Chronicles*). Choose another volunteer to identify which book comes after Ezra. (*Nehemiah*)

SAY • Let's play a game to review today's story. Everyone should get into a kneeling or squatting position. When I ask a question, pop up quickly if you know the answer. I will ask the first two or three kids who pop up to share their answers with the group.

When I ask our big picture question—***How can we obey God?***—everyone who knows the answer can pop up and shout out the answer together.

Ask the following review questions:

1. Which prophet told about God's promise to bring His people home? (*Jeremiah, Ezra 1:1*)
2. How long were God's people in exile? (*70 years, Jer. 29:10*)
3. After the priests finished rebuilding the altar, what did the people do? (*They gave a burnt offering to God, Ezra 3:2-3*)
4. What did the people say when they sang praises to God? (*"The Lord is good. His faithful love will last forever"; Ezra 3:11*)
5. ***How can we obey God? We trust God to give us strength to obey Him.***

Option: Retell or review the Bible story using the bolded text of the Bible story script.

Activity choice (10 minutes)

OPTION 1: Bible promises game

Write the following Bible promises on separate index cards.

Write the Scripture references on additional index cards:

1. The Lord will never leave us. (Hebrews 13:5)
2. The Lord will be our helper. (Hebrews 13:6)
3. All things are possible with God. (Mark 10:27)
4. Anyone who believes has eternal life. (John 6:47)



- Bibles
- index cards
- marker

5. God will give us what we need. (Philippians 4:19)
6. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Joel 2:32)

Position the promise cards faceup on the floor. Guide half of the kids to sit in a circle around the cards. Guide each remaining kid to stand behind someone who is seated. Give standing kids a Bible and a Scripture reference card.

Call on standing kids one at a time to read a Bible verse. Kids sitting should look at the promises. If a kid sees the matching promise, she should slap her hand down over the promise card. Determine if the card is a match. If so, she may collect the card. If not, allow other kids to look for the matching card. Continue for each Bible verse and promise.

SAY • God always keeps His promises! The Israelites waited 70 years for God to keep His promise, and God did. **God changed the king's heart so the Israelites could go home.**

OPTION 2: Make care kits for disaster victims

Before the session, collect essential care items to make care kits. Consider emailing parents or church members and asking for donations.

Arrange to deliver the care kits to a fire station or local disaster relief organization this week.

SAY • **God changed the king's heart so the Israelites could go home.** How do you think the Israelites felt? Being away from home or without a home can be very difficult. We are going to put together some care kits to help people who are displaced from their homes due to fires or natural disasters.

Lead kids to assemble care bags with essential items.

Consider including a card or brochure with information

- gallon-size ziplock bags
- essential items:
 - travel-size shampoo,
 - toothpaste, soap,
 - lotion, deodorant,
 - tissues, washcloth,
 - brush, and Bible

about your church. When kids finish, lead them in prayer for the people who will receive the care kits. Pray that God would comfort them and that they would hope in Jesus' promise to one day restore a greater home for those who trust in Him.

SAY • I will deliver these care kits this week so people who have been displaced from their homes will have some basic necessities. Each time you enter your house or apartment this week, thank God for His provision of a home for your family. You can thank Him especially for His promise of a greater home where we will live with Him forever.

Journal and prayer (5 minutes)

Distribute journal pages and pencils.

SAY • After Jesus rose from the grave, He told His disciples that He would go to prepare a place for them. For people who follow Jesus, this place He is preparing is their eternal home with Him.

God promises us through the Bible that our home with Him will be a place where all things will be made new. There will be no more pain or suffering or crying anymore. Sin will be wiped away.

Imagine this new home! Write in your journal what you hope our home with God is like. How will it feel to be there? What questions do you have?

Close in prayer. As time allows, lead kids to complete "What Just Happened?" on the activity page. Kids should fill in the word puzzle with words from the main point of today's Bible story. Then fill in the blanks: **God changed the king's heart so the Israelites could go home.**

Option: Review the gospel with boys and girls. Explain that kids are welcome to speak with you or another teacher if they have questions.

- pencils
- Journal Page
- "What Just Happened?" activity page, 1 per kid

Tip: Give parents this week's *Big Picture Cards for Families* to allow families to interact with the biblical content at home.