

The Return Home

*Sometimes, when hope seems dead
and the darkness of night closes in strong against us,
God is about to do something really big.*

Introduction

Remember the introduction from session 17 — about how some movies feel like they are about to end wrong? Near the conclusion of the classic *E.T.*, the heroic little alien dies. His finger will not glow; his body lies pale and lifeless.

In shock, the audience waits for something to happen. Things can't end like this. "Wake up, E.T.! Get up!" Finally, as the music builds to a crescendo, hope returns. E.T. is alive! He has phoned home. His friends are coming. He glows again. The movie's suspense, though only minutes, seemed to last forever.

In *The Story*, the people of Israel awaited their "resurrection" from exile not seconds, minutes, hours, or days. Hope did not return in weeks, a few months, or even a decade. The people of God waited for seventy years ... almost two generations!

Finally, God's plan to bring his people back to himself began again. God raised up prophets and leaders who loved him and glowed with his holy presence. Boldness was breathed into the people and hope returned. This was the long-awaited moment when the people of Israel would return to the Promised Land, rebuild the city of Jerusalem, and experience the grace of God in ways they had longed for over their decades of exile.

Talk About It

Tell about an experience when you waited a long time for God to take action or answer a prayer. How did you meet God in the waiting and in the time when he finally answered?

DVD Teaching Notes

As you watch the video segment for session 19, use the following outline to record anything that stands out to you.

Returning home

The temple as a divine teaching aid

Sidetracked

Giving careful thoughts to your ways

DVD Discussion

1. In the DVD segment Randy pointed out that God was “pulling some strings in the Upper Story” (putting King Cyrus on the throne) so that he could make changes in the Lower Story (set the exiles free). Give an example of a time in your life when you know that God was moving in the Upper Story so that he could accomplish something in your Lower Story.
2. Randy talked about how God’s big thing can become our little thing if we are not careful. When this happens, we get off track. What are examples of how God’s big thing can become our little thing? What can we do to make sure we are really seeking to keep God’s big thing on the front burner of our heart and life?

*Give careful thoughts to your ways.
Evaluate your priorities.
Assess your strategies.
“Is God’s big thing my big thing?”*

3. When the people of Israel began working on the foundation of the temple (Ezra 4; *The Story*, p. 265) they met resistance. What kind of conflict and opposition did the people face? When we seek to follow God’s will with a passionate heart, what resistance might we face?

4. Eventually the people got sidetracked from rebuilding God's temple. It was sixteen years before he finally got them back on track (Haggai 1; *The Story*, pp. 266–267). What slowed down their work and what got them up and moving again?

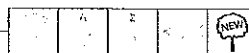
What are some of the consequences we face when we do our own thing and forget to follow God's plan for our lives?

*When nothing quenches our deepest thirsts,
when no achievements abate our restless hunger,
when droughts turn our fields into deserts and retirements
into pocket change, what can we do? God's answer is clear.
"Give careful thoughts to your ways."*

5. What did God promise the people if they would move forward with his work (Haggai 2; *The Story*, pp. 267–268)? How does this bring you hope and inspiration to walk in obedience to God's leading?
6. The end of this chapter of *The Story* offers a glimpse of the political wrangling that took place behind the scenes. The governor of the region wanted the people to stop building the temple and accused them of

having no permission to build it. After communication with the king of Babylon, everything changed—and, remember, there were no phones or email (Ezra 5–6; *The Story*, pp. 270–273). How did God turn everything upside down and provide for the temple? How do you see the Upper Story breaking into the Lower Story again?

7. God called the people to action through his prophets such as Haggai, who told them to get up to the hills, gather wood, and begin building... pretty practical stuff! What is one next step you need to take to "gather wood" and start building into God's plan for your life? How can your group members pray for you and encourage you as you take this step?



8. Read movement 5 of *The Story* (p. 11 of this participant's guide). How does God unfold his story in this fifth movement and how does this connect with your story?