

RETURNING TO CAMPUS: BIBLE STUDY #2 (45 minutes)

Isaiah 55 NIV, Back to “Normal” Life, Leader Instructions

5 min - Community and Vision

Lead an activity that helps your group get to know one another. Then tell the group your vision for why you are meeting and what you want to see God do.

Living through the COVID-19 pandemic season meant big changes for many of us. Maybe you suddenly found yourself learning or teaching online, juggling family and campus responsibilities, isolated from friends, taking a semester off, or unexpectedly moving back home. Whatever your experience was like, for many of us it felt like a forced extended journey to an unfamiliar place we did not want to go. We have had to change habits, customs, practices, and expectations simply to get by. Many unexpected things have happened for which we could not have prepared ourselves. We have been trying to stay afloat emotionally and spiritually, but the trek has been difficult.

Whether we like it or not, this extended journey through difficult times has changed us. We are not the same people we were in early 2020, nor are we the same people we would have been today if COVID had never existed. We long to get “back to normal” but there is no such thing. We are “returning home” to a way of being that feels familiar and alien at the same time.

What should we *do* with this experience as we return more fully to “normal” life on campus and in our communities?

For those of us who want “normal” to look a certain way again, there is an invitation to grieve what has been lost. For those who want to “feel normal” again, there is an invitation to assess today’s reality and embrace the *new me* and the *new us* in this *new time*. Jesus welcomes us to experience today with a fresh start, knowing that he makes sense of the beauty and trauma of our past experiences and holds a secured future.

1 min - Pray

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your study.

3 min - Read

Hand out a manuscript of the text to each participant. Read the text out loud together. Allow two minutes for everyone to re-read the text individually.

1 min - Context

Identify the context of this passage together.

The people of ancient Israel knew what it was like to long for the comfort and stability of home. Though they had felt secure in their relationship with God through the temple in Jerusalem, despite periods of war with neighboring nations, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC shattered their very identity and understanding of what it meant to be the people of God. For generations, they had been rebelling against God and rejecting the prophets who were trying to call them back to God. Their injustices against the vulnerable and worship of idols caused God to exile them to Babylon, where they were left to wonder what the future would hold and question whether they dare ever hope in God again.

Isaiah 55 is the word of God to his people in exile, calling them to return to God. Isaiah offers a window into what it may have been like for a displaced and broken people to look expectantly toward returning to their homeland and their normal way of life.

To learn more about exile, check out [this video from the Bible Project](#).

5 min - Observe

“On your own, look closely at the passage in front of you. Be a curious reader and mark what you see. Note characters, relationships, locations, time, actions, repeated words, comparisons, contrasts, cause and effect. If you have time, make sections and label them.”

7 min - Share

“Let’s share out loud. For now, we’ll stick with observations that the whole group can agree upon, and then later we’ll move into interpretation. What do you see?” *Start in pairs or go in a circle, if they need a warmup.*

12 min - Interpret (add time here if you have more than 45 minutes total)

“Let’s get curious and ask questions that will help us discuss what the author wanted the original readers to understand. Good questions come from our best observations. I will collect our questions and then we will use the text to answer them, along with three questions I will add (see below). While answering, let’s listen and make space for one another as we share. We will keep the text at the center. Feel free to reference the Old Testament if you’d like, since the original audience would have had access to it.

- Make a list of the many compelling invitations and commands from God in verses 1-7. Isaiah is calling the people to repent, which means to turn away from sin, return to God, and listen and obey. How do you think this call to repentance and trust might have sounded to the exiled people in the midst of their suffering?
- In verses 10-13, Isaiah compares three things – the effect of the rain and the snow coming down, the effect of God’s word going out from his mouth, and the effect of God’s people going out in joy and peace. How are these three instances of movement and impact similar or different? Why is Isaiah making this comparison?
- What needs and questions do you see God addressing throughout this text? Why would God want to speak these words, and what can we learn about the sort of relationship God wants to have with his people?

5 min - Summarize

“If you could communicate the main point of this passage in just one sentence, what would it be? What core message is the author communicating to the original audience?” *After some group discussion, retell the passage in your own words and share what you have prepared.*

- God gives purpose and hope to his people when the future seems uncertain.

5 min - Apply (add time here if you have more than 45 minutes total)

“Let’s apply the core message to our own lives.” *Select a question or two, depending on time. Allow a quiet moment and then share all together or just in pairs. Model vulnerability.*

- Being reminded of God’s purposes for them while they were in exile questioning everything might have felt like a homecoming to the people of Israel. What losses or setbacks in your relationship with God have you experienced during this COVID season? Take a moment to name them, surrender them to God, and receive God’s invitation to turn away from them and come back to God.
- In what ways do you sense Jesus redefining “purpose” for you in this new season?
- Isaiah paints a picture of a worldwide feast that brings life and salvation for all the nations through Israel. What corners of campus do you long to see turning to God and springing up with new life? Ask the Spirit to lead you and send you to bring God’s word to new places.
- As you try to embrace this new way of “being me” and “being us” in this new time, how do you sense God inviting you to trust him with your expectations and hopes? In what ways is God calling you to repent or grieve? What new surprises and excitements do you want to celebrate?

1 min - Pray

Close in prayer together or in pairs.