



Small Group Guide – September 17 & 20

The Return – God Is Ready for Your Return

Date: September 17 & 20, 2026

Focus Passage(s): Ezra 1-2

Theme: God is ready for your return. It's time to ACT.

Suggested Schedule (60 minutes total)

Segment	Time	Description
Icebreaker	10 min	Get comfortable, begin connecting
Intro/Recap	5 min	Read the key passages for the week
Group Discussion	25 min	Dive into Scripture and discuss application
Deeper Dive Option	5–10 min	Deeper Bible study or individual challenge
Prayer & Requests	10–15 min	Close in prayer for growth + personal needs

Welcome + Icebreaker (10 min)

When you have been away from home for a while, what is one thing you really look forward to when you return?

What is something you once did consistently, stopped doing for a while, and then had a difficult time starting again?

Key Message Recap

Sometimes leaving happens all at once. But often, drifting happens so gradually that we do not even realize how far we have moved. That can happen spiritually, too. Tonight we are going to talk about what happens when we recognize the drift and discover that God is already inviting us to return.

Discussion Questions (25 min)

Read Ezra 1:1-3

Before the people begin moving home, something has already happened. **God moved first.** He stirred the heart of Cyrus and made the return possible.

Then the people had a decision to make.

Discuss What does it tell you about God's character that He began making a way for His people to return before they started moving?

Key Truth - Our return to God begins with God's grace, not our goodness.

Drift Usually Happens Slowly

The message describes several ways spiritual drift can happen. Our schedules become full while our souls become empty. Pain causes us to pull away from God. Unanswered prayer becomes less prayer. Other things become more urgent than gathering with God's people. Sin becomes easier to justify. God begins to feel quieter and farther away.

Discuss

- Why is spiritual drift sometimes difficult to recognize while it is happening?
- Which circumstances tend to make people especially vulnerable to drifting from God?
- How can busyness disguise spiritual drift?
- What are some warning signs that your relationship with God may be moving from relationship toward routine?

Key Truth - We rarely drift toward God accidentally. Returning requires intentionality.

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God Makes the First Move

Read Ezra 1:1 God had already promised through Jeremiah that His people would return, then He stirred the heart of Cyrus, an unexpected person, to open the way. The message says: **"Before the people return, God is already working. Before they take a step, God is already moving."**

Discuss

- Why is it significant that God initiated the return?
- How does this challenge the idea that we have to "get ourselves together" before coming back to God?
- Have you ever looked back and realized God was working before you recognized it?

Key Truth - God's invitation to return begins with grace.

An Invitation Still Requires a Response

Read Ezra 1:3 Cyrus opens the door for God's people to return, but notice something important - they were not forced to go. Some returned. Some stayed. As the message describes it, the invitation can be given and still ignored.

Discuss

- Why might someone have chosen to stay in Babylon even when they were free to return?
- What makes familiar circumstances so difficult to leave, even when we know God is calling us toward something better?
- What are some ways we delay responding to God today?
- Have you ever known what God wanted you to do, but kept putting it off?

Key Truth - God's grace invites us, but grace still calls for a response.

Returning Is Intentional

Read Ezra 2:1-5 At first glance, Ezra 2 looks like a list of names and numbers, but every name represents a decision. These were real people with homes, families, possessions, routines, comfort and reasons to stay.

Yet thousands of them decided, **"I'm going back."**

The message says "Returning isn't just an emotional thing. It's an intentional thing. They didn't just feel like they should go home, they didn't just want to go home. They weren't just invited home. They did something."

Discuss

- What is the difference between feeling convicted and actually responding?
- Why can a spiritual experience feel meaningful in the moment, but produce no lasting change?
- What usually happens when we continually delay something we know God is asking us to do?
- Where might good intentions be substituting for actual obedience in your life?

Key Truth - Returning eventually has to move from something we feel to something we do.

Returning Is Not Just for People Who Completely Walked Away

The message makes an important distinction. You can still attend church, know the songs, listen to the message, believe in God, and **still** have parts of your life that have drifted.

It could be your...

Thought life Priorities Relationships Schedule and pace Habits
Finances Private choices

Returning isn't just for the person who left completely, it is also for the person who has drifted.

Discuss

- Why can spiritual drift be harder to recognize when we are still doing outwardly spiritual things?
- What is the difference between including God in our lives and actually allowing Him to lead our lives?
- Which area of life is easiest for you to manage without intentionally involving God?

Key Truth - God is not simply inviting us back into religious activity. He is inviting us back into relationship.

More Truth From the Gospels (10 min)

Ezra tells the story of God's people returning from exile. Centuries later, Jesus tells another story about returning home. It gives us an incredible picture of God's heart toward people who have wandered.

Jesus Shows Us the Father's Heart Toward Those Who Return

Read Luke 15:11-24 Jesus tells the story of a son who leaves his father and travels to a distant land, and eventually his life falls apart. Then something important happens - he recognizes where he is. He decides to return, gets up and goes home.

Foundational Truth - God is not reluctantly allowing us to return. Jesus portrays the Father as ready to receive those who come home.

Discuss

- What do you notice about the father's response when his son returns?
- How is the father's reaction different from what the son expected?
- What does this story reveal about God's heart toward someone who has wandered?

The Son Acknowledges the Drift

Read Luke 15:17-19 The turning point begins when the son recognizes his situation, and stops pretending. He acknowledges what has happened. That sounds a lot like the first part of ACT, **acknowledge the drift**.

Foundational Truth - Returning often begins with being honest about where we actually are.

Discuss Why is honesty with God so important when we recognize spiritual drift?

The Son Chooses to Respond

The son does not merely think, "**Going home would probably be a good idea.**" He decides, "**I will go home to my father.**"

That connects with the second part of ACT, **choose to respond**.

Foundational Truth - Conviction becomes meaningful when it leads toward a decision.

Discuss What is the difference between wanting your relationship with God to change and deciding to do something about it?

The Son Takes a Step

Then comes one of the most important moments in Jesus' story. The son gets up and goes.

Even though he doesn't have everything figured out, and doesn't know exactly what will happen, he simply starts home.

That is the final part of "ACT." **Take a step.**

Foundational Truth - You do not have to complete the entire journey today. You do need to start moving.

Discuss What is one small step toward God that can become significant when we actually take it?

The Father Runs Toward Him

The son expects judgment or demotion.

Instead, Jesus describes a father filled with compassion who runs toward his returning son, and welcomes him home. His response beautifully reinforces the message that **God is ready for your return.**

Foundational Truth - When we return to God, we are returning to grace.

Real-life Application (5 min)

You do not have to be completely separated from God to need to return. Maybe there is simply an area where you have drifted, from the list above, or in another area such as your prayer life, your time in Scripture, or your attitude.

The question is not if you have completely walked away from God, but a better question might be if there is any part of your life where you've slowly stopped allowing God to lead.

Reflection Question

Where might God be inviting you to return right now?

Next Steps Challenge (5 min)

The message gives us a simple way to remember our response: **ACT**

A - Acknowledge the Drift

Stop pretending, and be honest.

God, I'm not where I used to be in this area.

The message reminds us: **"What you won't acknowledge, you won't address."**

C - Choose to Respond

Do not wait for someday, or until life slows down, or until you feel more spiritual. Make a decision.

God, I'm responding to Your invitation.

T - Take a Step

You do not have to take every step now. Just take one.

Read your Bible. Pray. Join a group. Have the difficult conversation. Ask for help. Confess something. Forgive someone. Change a habit. Surrender something you have been trying to control.

What is your one step?

Be specific enough that you will know whether you actually did it!

Prayer Time (10 min)

Return-Focused Prayer

Thank God that He does not give up on people who drift.

Thank Jesus for making our return possible through the cross.

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal areas where you have drifted.

Pray for courage to acknowledge those areas honestly and ask God for strength to respond instead of delaying. Pray for clarity about the next step God wants you to take.

Thank God that returning means stepping toward grace rather than earning your way back.

***Quiet Prayer* "God, where have I drifted? What step are You asking me to take?"**

From Sunday's message - "This isn't about checking a box or following a list or me getting you to do a thing you don't want to do. It's not about The Ridge at all. It's about the God you're returning to. I know what's on the other side of taking a step toward God. And I don't even do it all the time like I should. But listen, I wholeheartedly believe that taking a step toward God brings joy and peace and clarity and strength and community. That's why we say we 'relentlessly pursue next steps.'

And the reason you can take that step, even imperfectly, even hesitantly, is because of Jesus. Your return to God is not based on how well you've done, it's based on what he has already done for you. The cross is the ultimate proof that God is not waiting on you to clean yourself up before you come back. He came for you when you were far, when you were drifting, when you were in your sin. Jesus took your place, paid your debt, and made a way home.

So when you take a step toward God, you're not stepping into judgment, you're stepping into grace that has already been paid for in full. God is ready for your return, not because you've earned it, but because Jesus made it possible."

Deeper Dive - Character Study

Peter: Returning After Failure

Primary Scripture: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62; John 21:1-19

Overview

Peter's story gives us a powerful picture of someone who loved Jesus and still drifted badly in a critical moment. He confidently told Jesus he was ready to follow Him anywhere, but, when pressure came, Peter denied knowing Jesus.

Not once.

Three times.

Luke tells us that after Peter's third denial, Jesus looked at him. Peter remembered what Jesus had said and left weeping bitterly. He had failed in a way he probably never imagined possible. But failure was not the end of Peter's story. After the resurrection, Jesus intentionally meets him again. Jesus was ready for his return.

Key Moment 1: Peter Believes He Will Never Drift

Read Luke 22:31-34 Peter is confident. He believes he knows exactly how he will respond under pressure.

Discuss Why can spiritual confidence sometimes make us less aware of our vulnerability to drift?

Key Moment 2: Peter Fails

Read Luke 22:54-62 Peter denies Jesus three times. Then he realizes what he has done.

Discuss

- What emotions do you imagine Peter experienced?
- Why can shame make returning to God difficult?
- When we fail spiritually, what lies might we begin believing about how God sees us?

Key Truth - Failure may explain where we are, but it does not have to determine where we stay.

Key Moment 3: Jesus Moves Toward Peter

Read John 21:1-17

After the resurrection, Jesus meets the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee and prepares breakfast. Then He talks with Peter. He doesn't pretend Peter's failure never happened, but neither does Jesus discard him.

Three times, Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. Three times, Peter responds. And, three times, Jesus gives Peter responsibility.

Discuss

- What does Jesus' approach to Peter reveal about His character?
 - Why do you think Jesus addressed Peter's failure instead of simply ignoring it?
 - What is the difference between restoration and pretending nothing happened?
 - How does grace give us courage to acknowledge our drift honestly?
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Key Moment 4: Peter Takes Another Step

Read John 21:18-19

Jesus' invitation to Peter ends where Peter's journey originally began **"Follow me."** Peter cannot change what happened, but he can decide what he does next.

Discuss

1. How does Peter's story illustrate Acknowledge, Choose, and Take a step?
2. What might have happened if Peter allowed shame to keep him from returning?
3. How does Jesus' restoration of Peter give hope to someone who believes they have gone too far?
4. Where might Jesus simply be saying "Follow me" again in your life?

Key Takeaways

- Spiritual drift can happen even to people who genuinely love Jesus.
 - God does not require us to hide our failures before returning.
 - Jesus meets people in their failure with both truth and grace.
 - Returning does not mean pretending the past never happened.
 - Grace allows us to acknowledge what happened without allowing shame to define us.
 - We cannot change yesterday, but we can take our next step today.
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Additional Scriptures for Further Study

Jeremiah 29:10-14

God promises that the exile will not last forever and speaks of His people's future restoration.

James 4:7-10

An invitation to humble ourselves and draw near to God.

Psalms 51:1-12

David models honest confession and asks God for restoration after serious sin.

Joel 2:12-13

God calls His people to return to Him wholeheartedly.

1 John 1:8-9

Confession is met with God's faithfulness and forgiveness.