

# 'Starting again'

Returning to life after lockdown

*"Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong ..."* (Haggai 2.3f)

As the lockdown restrictions are gradually eased and we return bit by bit to the rhythms of congregational life, the return of the exiles from Babylon provides an instructive, parallel narrative.

The return from Babylon was both gradual and difficult: it's narrated in the two books Ezra and Nehemiah (which were originally one book), and the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah had an integral part to play in the challenges facing the people back then.

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## 1. Introduction

*".. I know the plans I have for you .."*

Jeremiah 29.10-14

These well-known and much loved verses are part of a letter which Jeremiah sent to instruct and encourage the exiles in Babylon. They provide a helpful introduction to this series of studies, highlighting as they do the sovereignty of God in the purpose He has both for and through His people.

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**1. Read Jer.29.4-14.** Reading in from the start of the letter which Jeremiah wrote will help you see the context of the verses we'll be looking at more particularly.

How hard do you find it to maintain the balance between living in the present (vv.4-9) and living for the future (vv.10-14)?

Reflect on the words of v.7 and consider how the Lord means to challenge you through them: what action will you take in response to His word here?

**2. Read Jer.29.10.** The 70 years (see Jer.25, esp.v.11) are generally reckoned either from the first wave of exiles (605BC) to the return (538–535), or from the destruction of the temple (586BC) to the building of the new one (516).

How would this promise of God have encouraged the people of Israel in exile?

What encouragement does this verse give you and why?

**3. Read Jer.29.11.** For the people of Israel, the exile must have seemed like the end of the road, a point (and a place) of no return, occasioned by their persistent disobedience.

What was the hope and the future which was promised here to the exiles?

Why is it valid to take a word directed to the exiles in Babylon and apply it to ourselves? And how might this word from the Lord be rightly applied to us?

**4. Read Jer.29.12-14.** The theme of a great 'return' is a recurring one through the Bible, which finds its full expression in the ministry of Jesus – He has come to take us back home.

What examples of God's bringing His people back home can you think of?

In what ways does the promise of these verses encourage your own heart?