RESUMING GROUP LIFE AFTER A CAPTIVITY

July 2021

Hello and it is great to be with you! My name is Steve Gladen and I have had the privilege of overseeing our 7,000+ small groups since the close of 1997 when we had 258 groups. Now I know much of this series has been directed to senior pastors and weekend attenders. However, for this session I want to address those of you outside that are predominantly in small group or adult Sunday schools (that aren’t mini temple courts 😉). Now I may say small groups, but I am referring to groupings of people focused on sanctification or better known as discipleship. At Saddleback, our small groups are our discipleship strategy! Where we don’t just learn but apply and do.

Now how do we re-enter the world of groups and church life as the pandemic subsides?

You cannot read through the Bible without noticing that the concept of CAPTIVITY is a major theme of the Old Testament. Of course, the people of Israel spent 400 years in captivity in Egypt and then later 70 more years in captivity in Babylon. The words “Captivity” and “captives” are used over 400 times in the Bible.

I wanted to understand this concept better, so I started by looking up a definition of the word! We talk about animals in a zoo living in captivity. What is CAPTIVITY? I put a definition on your outline: “Captivity is the condition of having your freedom limited involuntarily. Captivity is being confined, or trapped, or restricted or controlled against your will.”

The Opposite of captivity is emancipation, freedom, independence, liberty, and choice.

Now- using that definition – we could say that this past year+ of the COVID19 global pandemic was a Year of Captivity for all of us. Our Freedom was limited, our Choices have been restricted, our Lifestyles have been confined, our behavior has been controlled, and in some ways, we have felt trapped by the pandemic.

But now, it seems that we may be moving into a less-restricted time. Slowly, our freedoms and choices are being restored. But the world that we are returning to is a lot different that it was a year ago. I would compare it to how a military serviceman or service woman feels when they return from deployment in a war overseas. When they come back home, things have changed. And during their time in battle, they changed too. So, there is often some difficulty in reentering normal life, because normal has changed!

I am certain that tens of millions of people around the world will feel that way in this year as we resume life after pandemic. Things are never going back to the way they were exactly before the pandemic. The world has changed AND YOU have changed. We will all have to make some adjustments. In many ways, this past year was one long trauma. And if you know anything about trauma, you know that it changes you. You’re not the same after a major trauma. Your small group won’t be the same!

So, I want to help you make the adjustments you’ll need to make so that you can resume Small Group Life successfully as best as you can with God’s help.

In many ways, God is giving us an opportunity to reset our lives after this pandemic. Instead of just returning to the same old patterns and behaviors and habits and hurts and hang-ups, God is giving us a moment to begin building better, more balanced and healthy lives. What the Bible calls new wineskins (Luke 5:37ff). That’s why I to address how your groups can have a better more Biblical group than before the pandemic.

Fortunately, the Bible gives us a lot of encouragement and practical advice on how to do this after experiencing a time when our choices and freedom has been restricted.

In the Old Testament, there are FIVE books of encouragement that were written to God’s people to encourage them and tell them what to do when they were finally released from 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Those five Post-Captivity books are the books of Ezra (who was a priest), Nehemiah (who was a civic leader and builder, and Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi who were prophets of God.

I’m going to share with you the encouraging principles God gave to his people through these 5 men, to help people resume their lives, and even build better, stronger Biblical lives, after experiencing trauma and crisis.

I want to introduce you to 5 principles from God’s word on how your Group Life can reenter the world as the Covid Captivity hopefully winds down,

Now we find the first principle of resuming group life in the book of Ezra.

1. EXPECT TO FEEL MIXED EMOTIONS WHEN YOU GATHER

Here’s the background; when the people were allowed to return to Jerusalem after 70 years in captivity in Babylon, they found their homes, the city, and the temple -their house of worship, in ruins. Everything has been destroyed. So the first thing they did-their first priority - was to start rebuilding the house of worship. They started by laying a new foundation for a new house of worship. This brought everyone great joy, but it also brought grief and sadness to those who remembered what worship had been like in the old temple. Things were different now. And while they were rebuilding the temple, they were going to have to meet outside.

Ezra 3:8-13 (NCV) says “… all who had returned from captivity (in Babylon) began to work on rebuilding the Temple of God… When the builders finished laying the foundation … everyone sang with thanksgiving to God and shouted ‘Praise the Lord! The foundation of his Temple has been laid!” BUT many of the older people, including the priests and family leaders who had seen and remembered the first Temple wept with sadness when they saw new foundation. But because everyone made so much noise that it could be heard far away, no one could tell the difference between the joyful shouting and the sad crying, and it was all mingled together.”

Don’t be surprised if you feel mixed emotions, and even conflict emotions, as you reenter group life, and as we began publicly gathering again. You can feel joy that we are finally back together, but also feel sadness at the same time for what was lost this past year, and for how things are going to be different post- pandemic. This is 100% normal! It is possible to have conflicting emotions at the exact same time -especially after a trauma or a major loss.

We have always felt there would be a tsunami of grief this year around the world, as people realized all they lost in the past year. Here in America, families are grieving the loss of over half a million family members who have died from COVID 19. But even those who are never touched by the virus itself, have had losses -lost jobs, lost graduations, missed celebrations and family events like weddings, graduations, and the birth of babies. Many of you had loved ones die and you couldn’t travel to their funerals.

The Bible tells us to “weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice” so you need to be empathetic with other people’s mixed emotions in the days ahead and you need to give yourself grace for the mixed emotions you’re going to feel as things open up more. You’ve had a full year to get used to new patterns and new habits, and now things are going to be radically changed again. Expect to have mixed emotions! Congratulations! Your Group and you are normal!

Now here’s the second principle God wants you to practice in this new time:

2. EXTRACT THE LESSONS I LEARNED…now this is a great Group exercise

As restrictions are eased and opportunities open up, before you rush off and start doing a bunch of new things, God wants you to pause for a moment and consider the lessons that you have learned in the past year. Write them down so you don’t forget them! Write them down so you can review them! Write them down so you can share them with other generations. Don’t let this past year be wasted! Make sure that you take the time to glean spiritual truths from what you experienced this past year. St. Paul says this

Gal. 3:4 (ICB) “You have experienced many things. Were all those experiences wasted? I hope not!”

If you can’t identify and write down some lessons you learned in this past year of trauma - then for you, the entire year was wasted! All that pain and frustration has no value to you. The message translation says it this way:

Gal. 3: 4 (Mes) “Did you go through this whole painful learning process for nothing? It is not yet a total loss, but it certainly will be if you keep this up!”

So, your homework assignment for this week in Group is:

I have listed on your outline some starter questions for you to consider in thinking through what life lessons you have learned during the year pandemic. I want you to get alone in a quiet space sometime this week before Group, and ask yourself: what did I learn in this past year? Then write down your answers. You might start a light Journal for the rest of your life- and the first page could be: life lessons learned during the pandemic: here are some starter questions:

What have I learned about what matters most?

What have I learned about what doesn’t matter?

What have I learned about my weaknesses?

What am I learned about my strengths?

What I learned about my relationships?

Whenever I learned about the pace of my life?

What have I learned this past year about God?

What am I learned about the world and the culture I live in?

What am I learned about using my time?

What I learned about money?

What I learned about happiness?

Then at Group, share with each other your findings. Maybe even break into smaller gender based sub groups.

Now the third principle we learn for resuming life after captivity is one we get from a prophet named Haggai, who wrote to encourage people as they were trying to resume a normal life:

1. EVALUATE EVERYTHING YOU DID BEFORE IN GROUP BEFORE YOU RESUME

Don’t just automatically restart doing everything you were doing in Group before the pandemic. It is likely that some of those activities you shouldn’t restart. God is giving you an opportunity to reset your life. To establish new habits and patterns. To start things you’ve always wanted to start but didn’t have time because you are doing other things. And there are things God wants you to stop doing because they were harmful or not helpful to you. God is giving you an amazing opportunity to reset your life, reset your group and to build a better Biblical life for the rest of your life. But that begins with evaluating and analyzing and examining what you were doing and then decide whether you should restart it or not! Here’s what God said through Haggai:

Haggai 1:5-7 (Mes/NIV) “This is what the Lord Almighty wants you to do: Take a good, hard look at your life. Think it over! You’ve spent a lot of money, but you haven't much to show for it. You keep filling your plates, but you never get filled up! You keep drinking but you're always thirsty. You put on layers of clothes, but you can't get warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it! So, give serious thought to your ways!”

This is great advice from Haggai. But actually, Haggai is speaking for God. God is telling you to do this! To not do it would be disobedience.

God says, you need to admit your frustrations and lack of fulfillment and then ask yourself WHY? Why am I so unfulfilled? And if what I was doing before the pandemic was so unfulfilling, why should I start doing it again? Do I want to just restart the rat race?

Again, let me get your homework assignment. Instead of making it to do list. Start with making a don’t do list. What are some of the things I used to do that I’m not going to restart? Examine your Group life and personal life. Were you building Biblical community or just gathering with believers. Were you making disciples? Were you becoming more and more closer to Jesus. Were you getting closer to the Good News or Cable News? Do you know the pathway for being a disciple at your church as Jesus prayed in John 17, commanded in the GC and GC, as the early church modeled in Acts 2? Or are we just growing intellectually?

Before you get in a hurry to restart something you used to do before the pandemic, make sure you get all the facts first! The wisest man who ever lived- Solomon - once said this;

Pr. 19:2 (NLT) “Zeal without knowledge is not a good thing; a person who moves too quickly may go the wrong way.”

What is zeal? It is enthusiasm! It is passion! It is excitement! But before you get excited about all your restored freedom, make sure you get the facts first. Some things are not necessarily wrong; they are just not necessary! So, evaluate everything before resuming it! This is your chance for reset. That leads me to the fourth principle.

4. ENGAGE SLOWLY: DON’T BE IN A HURRY!

Keep connections Biblically high, don’t worry so much about attendance.

Don’t be in a rush to restart everything all at once! You don’t have the same energy level that you did before this pandemic! Be kind to yourself and be kind of others. Go slow!

Now I know that we’ve all been eager and in a hurry for this pandemic to be over. And we’ve all felt a little impatient. But God knows what he’s doing. And his timing is always perfect. And he wants you to trust him:

To the people who were in a hurry for everything to go back to the way they imagine things were in the past, a prophet named Habakkuk had his word from God to share:

HAB 2:3 (CEV) God says, “At the appointed time that I have decided, everything I’ve planned will happen. You can trust what I say about the future, but it won’t happen all at once. It may seem that it’s taking a long time, but be patient and keep on waiting, because the vision will surely happen!”

This might be a verse you want to write out on a card and put in your refrigerator or screen saver as a reminder to be patient. To engage slowly. To not get in a hurry. And go slow on reentry into the world.

You know this is such a common problem, that God had reminded his people of this principle of pacing- many different times. Hundreds of years earlier, when the Israelites were getting ready to possess the promised land that God promised to them, God warned them that it wouldn’t be instant. That their progress would be gradual and measured. Progress would be incremental, not instant. God had a plan, and part of that plan included a slower timetable than the people wanted.

EX. 23:29-30 God told the Israelites: “I’m NOT going to get rid of all your enemies in a single year, because the land would then be deserted and unmanaged, and wild animals would multiply quickly beyond your control. So, instead, I will drive them out slowly, little by little, until you’ve grown strong enough to take full possession of your land!”

I want you to notice that God’s slower timetable is always for our benefit! He says “I’m not going to get rid of this problem instantly. Instead, I will remove it gradually, so that you can grow strong enough, to take full possession of all the blessings that I want to give you! “ You might write this down:

In God’s sovereign plan, DELAYS are always for my benefit!

Here’s the fifth principle for resuming life after the pandemic or any other trauma or crisis or life-changing event. We get this principle from the prophet Isaiah. Now Isaiah lived before the captivity in Babylon, but he predicted it long before it happened, because God told him it would happen. And even more than that, Isaiah tells us what God wants us to do after any period of captivity. He knew that once the activity was over, people would be longing again for the good old days. “But Isaiah knew the good old days were not coming back. You can’t go back to a bygone era. You can only go forward in life. It is a waste of time to try and make things the way they were in the past. The past is past! It’s never coming back again! And God is a God of newness! He does NEW things all the time! The Bible says, “his mercies are new every morning!”

You cannot turn the clock back. What is past is past! It’s never coming back! So instead of bemoaning the loss of a bygone era- in your family, in your group, in your church, in your nation, or in the world, God wants you to do this instead:

5. EMBRACE THE NEW THINGS GOD IS DOING!

To embrace something is to accept it and love it and be content with it

ISA. 43:18-19 (NCV) “The Lord says, ‘Forget the former things, and do not dwell on the past. Instead, look at the new things I am going to do. They are already starting to happen. Can you see what I’ve begun to do?”

Now before you can embrace and accept and enjoy the new things God is doing, you must first SEE the new things God is doing!

Can you see it? Are you looking for it? If you’re always looking backwards at the past and always longing for the way things used to be, that like trying to drive your car looking constantly in your rearview mirror instead of looking at was ahead. You are guaranteed to crash!

We can grieve what we have lost. Grief is a legitimate and healthy response to loss. But we keep our eyes focused on the future and what God wants to do next!

You need to pray “God, I know that you’re going to do some really great and new and exciting things in the future, and I would like to be a part of them! In faith, I am signing up for the future you have for me!”

You know, even though Isaiah lived long before the Babylonian captivity happened, God gave him a glimpse of what it would be like after they all returned to Jerusalem. And as I read this encouraging passage this week, I claimed it as a promise for the future of our Saddleback Church family and I pray you do it for your church—both for the weekends and your small groups making disciples:

ISA. 49:19-20 (NLT/Mes) “Even though your land was unused and abandoned, it will soon be too small for all the new people – more people than you know what to do with! Your captivity will seem far away! And the new generation born in exile will return and say ‘We need more room! It’s crowded here!’”

So here’s my question to you: will you bemoan the past that is lost and never coming back or will you use your energy to look for and see and embrace the new things that God is going to do through your weekend services and your small groups?

IT’S YOUR CHOICE! Say in your heart right now, I want to reset my life for all Jesus wants in me, my group and the church.

To learn more about how to bring a healthy Biblical Small Group Ministry to your church, go to www.smallgroupnetwork.com/align