

## “Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”

Psalm 122

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For most of the past week we have been seeing images of destruction and devastation in the Holy Land, as rockets shoot towards Jerusalem from Gaza, and as Israeli forces send air strikes against Gaza. The casualties are mounting; as of this morning, at least 10 people had been killed in Israel, including one child, and over 180 have been killed in Gaza, including over 50 children.

The violence started in Jerusalem – a city holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is not the first time violence has erupted in the Holy Land – not by a long shot! – but it’s the first time since my visit there two years ago. I am experiencing this violence differently than other outbreaks in the past. It feels more vivid to me, more real. I have a greater understanding of why it *matters*, what’s at *stake*. So I am going to make an attempt to help you connect the dots between the Jerusalem of today with the Jerusalem of David, Solomon, and Jesus, the Israel of today with the Israel of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the violent conflict that is happening right now with the violent conflicts that happened in the Bible and beyond. I hope this will be helpful. I would ask you to allow me about five extra minutes today.

Let’s start with some geography. This is a satellite picture of the heart of Jerusalem, courtesy of Google Maps. Jerusalem is much larger than this – there are many neighborhoods, many governmental, religious, educational, and cultural buildings, many sports stadiums and parks that do not show up on this map. This picture shows the area that matters most, from a religious and historical perspective.

So, what are we looking at? Well, here’s a map of the same area, showing roads, bus stops, and a variety of important sites. If we put these two together, we get a marked photo that looks like this.

That’s a lot to try to take in all at once. Let me highlight some things. First, there is the Old City. This is a densely packed walled-in portion of Jerusalem, only about 1/3 of a square mile in size. The walls surrounding the Old City were built 500 years ago, but this portion of Jerusalem is more than 3,000 years old. There are a series of gates, through which people can enter or exit the Old City; those are marked with orange and white stars on this picture. Within the Old City is the Temple Mount. This is where the Jewish Temple stood in the time of Jesus; this is where the al-Aqsa Mosque stands now.

Here is a picture of the Temple Mount. It is a large plaza, with large open spaces, trees, columns, raised areas, and a few important buildings. The building in the center with the gold dome is called the Dome of the Rock. It is a Muslim shrine. Underneath the Dome is the Foundation Stone. According to Jewish tradition, this stone is believed to be the spot where God’s creation of the world began. It is believed to be the spiritual junction of Heaven and Earth, the holiest place on the entire planet. This rock is also believed to be the tip of Mount Moriah, the site where God instructed Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, in the story told in Genesis 22. The Temple Mount was built on Mount Moriah.

Now **Jerusalem did not originally belong to the Jews** – or the Christians, or the Muslims. When the Israelites arrived in the land in about the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, the city was called Jebus, and it was inhabited by a group of native Canaanites called Jebusites. It was the strongest, most fortified city in the land, and it withstood Israelite attempts to capture it for nearly 300 years. King David finally defeated the Jebusites, took the city, and made it his capital in about 1000 BC. That story is told in 2 Samuel 5.

David's son Solomon built the first Jewish Temple there, on Mount Moriah. That story is told in 1 Kings 6. The most sacred part of the temple – the Holy of Holies – was probably built right over the Foundation Stone. In David and Solomon's time and for the next several centuries, the residents of Jerusalem lived in an area south of the Temple Mount. This area is known as "the City of David" today. It is lower in elevation than the Temple Mount; the Jews literally went *up* to the temple to pray.

Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians beginning in 597 BC. Ten years later the city the Babylonians destroyed the city and the temple. That gruesome story is told in 2 Kings 24-25. Many of the leading citizens who survived were sent into exile in Babylon. Seventy years later, when the Persians came to power, the Jews were allowed to return home, and many of them did. Construction on a Second Temple started in about 516 BC; that story is told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Second Temple was nowhere near as grand as the First, but the Jews did the best they could. Their relative peace was short-lived; Alexander the Great conquered the entire region in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Jews regained independence for Jerusalem in 164 BC – that story is in the books of the Maccabees, which are in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles and in the Protestant Apocrypha. Independence lasted for about a century, but ultimately Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans, and taken by Herod the Great in 37 BC – just a few decades before Jesus was born. Herod embarked on many building projects in Jerusalem, most notably the complete reconstruction of the Temple and the entire Temple Mount. Portions of the walls of today's Temple Mount were put there by Herod's workers 2,000 years ago.

So by the time we get to Jesus, the city of Jerusalem had been taken by force multiple times. The city already had a long and complex history. The Romans allowed the Jews to practice their religion.

Jesus, the New Testament tells us, was brought to the Jewish Temple for his dedication as an infant. He returned there to celebrate Passover every year. Eventually, he returned there one last time, accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd of followers. We commemorate that event every year on **Palm Sunday**. He approached Jerusalem from the east, from the city of Bethany (not on this map). He borrowed a donkey in the village of Bethphage. He descended the Mount of Olives – the large hill east of the Old City – using a route something like this. He crossed the ravine at the bottom of the hill – the Kidron Valley – and entered the city, probably through the gate that is now called **the Golden Gate**.

He worshiped and taught in the Temple. He gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover, in an "upper room." **Tradition says that took place** in a part of the city a little ways south of the Zion Gate. Then he went across the valley, to **the Garden of Gethsemane**, at the base of the Mount of Olives. He was betrayed, and arrested. He was taken to the High Priest's house. **That's not marked** on this map, but it would have been a little bit to the west of the Temple Mount. The next morning, he was taken to the Governor's Headquarters, traditionally believed to be the Antonia Fortress, which was situated at **the northwest corner of the Temple Mount**. It's marked with a white square on this map. From there, Jesus was led through the streets of Jerusalem, carrying his cross, beaten and bloodied, to a place that was – at that point in time – outside the city's walls. He was impaled on a cross, and he died.

His body was placed in a nearby tomb. **Three days later**, he rose from the dead, and appeared to his disciples. **Forty days after that**, he appeared to his disciples one final time, on the Mount of Olives. **Then he ascended into heaven**, and took his seat at the right hand of God Almighty. **All of these sites**, and many more, are sacred to Christians. They overlap many sites that are sacred to Jews. The traditional site of upper room, for example, is *in the exact same building* that houses the tomb of David!

Nearly forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Jews revolted against the Romans. Ultimately that led to a five-month siege of the city of Jerusalem, and the burning and destruction of the temple – again. That story is told in graphic detail by the Jewish historian Josephus. The Jews were completely removed from Jerusalem. In the second century, the Romans built a temple on the site of the Jewish temple, dedicated to the Roman god Jupiter. For the next two hundred years Jerusalem was an unimportant pagan outpost. In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine rebuilt it as a Christian city. **The Church of the Holy Sepulchre** was built, encompassing the traditional sites of Christ's crucifixion and his empty tomb. Jews were still forbidden from entering the city, except on one day each year.

This situation lasted until the 600's. Around the year 610, an Arab man named Muhammad – who lived in Mecca, 750 miles south of Jerusalem, in what is now Saudi Arabia – began experiencing what he described as a series of visions. Those visions gave rise to the Muslim holy book, the Qu'ran, which draws on both Jewish and Christian traditions. In about the year 620, according to Muslim belief, Muhammad was mystically transported from the Great Mosque in Mecca to – guess where – **the Temple Mount in Jerusalem**. From there, he was taken up into heaven. In 638, one of Muhammad's successors took the city of Jerusalem by force. The followers of Muhammad – “Muslims,” which means “submitters to God” – built a house of prayer where they believe Muhammad ascended into heaven. That later became a mosque, **the al-Aqsa Mosque**; the name means “the Farthest Mosque.” It has been rebuilt several times, but it still stands on the **southern part of the Temple Mount** today. It is the third-holiest site in Islam. It was that mosque that Israeli police raided early this week, injuring hundreds of Muslims.

But **back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century**. Remember how the Jews had been prohibited from living in or entering Jerusalem? Jews had been denied access to the city for *more than five hundred years*. At first that was because of the Romans. Later, it was because of the *Christians*. The *Muslims* let them back in.

For several hundred years there was fairly peaceful co-existence between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the holy city. That changed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when a Muslim ruler ordered the destruction of all the churches. Christian crusaders retaliated; they massacred almost all of the Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the city and rebuilt many Christian shrines and churches. Another Muslim leader re-took Jerusalem in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; he permitted peoples of all three faiths to practice their religions freely. Christians took the city again in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. And on it went. In all, the city of Jerusalem has been attacked 52 times, captured and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times, and totally destroyed twice.

The modern conflict began in 1948, when the nation of Israel declared its independence in the wake of World War II. Six million Jewish men, women, and children had died during the Holocaust. Jews around the world took comfort in the knowledge that Israel was finally, at long last, a *nation* again.

But there was a cost, a terrible cost, one that is not well known in our country. The creation of Israel resulted in catastrophe for many Palestinians, the people who had historically lived in that region for many centuries. Most of them are Arab; most of them are Muslim; some of them are Christian. There was a war between Israeli and Arab forces in 1948, which Israel won. Hundreds of **Palestinian**

villages were demolished; over 80% of Palestinian village mosques were destroyed; some 700,000 Palestinians were displaced, and many of them became refugees. We all know about the Holocaust, the terrible tragedy that happened to the Jews. Not many of us know about the *Nakba*, the “Catastrophe,” the term Palestinians use to describe what happened to them. Approximately 300,000 more Palestinians were displaced when Israel captured the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights in 1967. Almost every conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians over the past 70 years has grown out of Israel’s ongoing displacement of Palestinians from their homes. You remember the suicide bombings? Most of the Palestinians who committed those violent attacks were people whose homes had been destroyed by Israel when they were young. Violence has a way of begetting further violence.

There have been some significant attempts to create a lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The fundamental issue is how to share territory between different groups who all feel they have a historical claim to the land. Many nationalistic Jews believe that they should have it *all*, based on God’s promises to Abraham in the book of Genesis. There have been attempts to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. So far all of those efforts have failed. Israel has created many “settlements” in those areas – settlements which the United Nations, the Red Cross, and basically every country other than Israel and the United States say are in violation of international law. It’s important to remember that most Palestinians are not terrorists, and many Jews are not nationalists; most Jews and Palestinians simply want to be able to live and worship in peace.

Now we have this current crisis. It started with Israeli attempts to remove some Palestinians living in Jerusalem just north of the Old City, and with tensions between Israeli police and Muslims who wanted to worship at the al-Asqa Mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, in which many Muslims fast every day until sundown. When 300 worshipers were injured, Hamas – the fundamentalist, militant, nationalist Palestinian organization – began shooting rockets from Gaza towards Jerusalem. Most of those rockets are being intercepted by Israel’s defense mechanisms. Israel responded with air strikes in Gaza. Gaza has no defense force against air strikes. Israel’s military might is vastly superior – and is funded, to a large degree, from the generous support that Israel receives from the United States. We give Israel \$3.8 billion a year – \$3.3 billion of which goes to the military. Every single Palestinian building that is being destroyed, every single Palestinian casualty, every single Palestinian family that loses their home – that’s your tax dollars at work. If that makes you uncomfortable ... well, join the club.

If we want to see a lasting peace in the Holy Land, it is going to require some incredibly difficult work. It is also, I believe, going to require divine assistance. We need *God’s* help. There are three faiths have long been at the center of it all, three religions that all believe in the power of prayer. Long ago, there was a Jew who offered a prayer of peace for Jerusalem. Christianity and Islam didn’t even exist yet. But I am inclined to think that Jews *and* Christians *and* Muslims could all be offering this prayer:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls,  
and security within your towers.”

For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, “Peace be within you.” (Psalm 122:6-8)

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