

“Israel and Gaza: The Long View”

Matthew 5:9

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The scenes coming out of Israel and Gaza this week have been horrendous and heartbreaking. The massive number of civilian casualties, including many children; the hostages; the humanitarian crisis ... the list goes on. I think every Christian should care about what's happening in the land where our Savior walked. I also know that, for me, having been to the Holy Land, having spent a few days in the occupied West Bank, having visited an Israeli settlement and a Palestinian refugee camp and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, this war feels *personal*. We also have friends who live in the Holy Land. What I want to do this morning is talk not so much about the *current* conflict, but rather some of the things that have led up to it. And, also, to think about what a desired *future* might look like.

When did this war start? Did it start last Saturday, when Hamas launched its brutal assault on Israel? Did it begin in 2007, when Hamas gained control of the Gaza Strip? Or in 1967, when Israel seized the West Bank and the Gaza Strip? Or in 1948, when the nation of Israel was founded? Or in 1917, when a movement began in Britain to establish a national home for the Jewish people? Or in 638, when Muslims conquered Jerusalem for the first time? Or in the 13th century BC, when the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan? Or several hundred years before that when, according to our holy scriptures, God promised Abraham that his descendants would live in that land? I think the answer to those questions are yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes. Every single one of those moments is a factor that has contributed to the *horror* that is going on right now. This current conflict really has its origins on about *page 10* in our Bible. Let us take a brief walk through each of those moments.

First: in the book of Genesis, chapter 12, God tells Abraham to go to the land where Israel is now. When Abraham gets there, God says: “To your offspring I will give this land.” (Genesis 12:7) God repeats that promise, in similar words, in Genesis 13, Genesis 15, Genesis 17, Genesis 26, Genesis 28, and Genesis 35. In one of those instances, God says, “I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding.” (Genesis 17:8) But that land was not uninhabited. Other people were already living there when God made that promise.

Several hundred years later, the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan. The Bible tells the story of how the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. The book of Joshua describes the Israelite conquest of the land, the slaughter of many of the people who lived there, and the division of the land among the twelve Israelite tribes. God told the Israelites to utterly wipe out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. It was a so-called “Holy War.” Whether things happened the way the Bible describes is questioned by many historians, but there is archaeological evidence of the destruction of many cities and a period of chaos in Canaan in the 13th century BC.

The city of Gaza, near the Mediterranean Sea, was *not* conquered by the Israelites. Gaza was one of five cities that belonged to the Philistines. The Philistines had originally come from the Aegean

Sea, where Greece is, and they had established a very strong foothold on the southwestern corner of the land. The Bible records numerous battles between the Israelites and the Philistines. Samson died battling Philistines in the city of Gaza. The Philistines were a thorn in Israel's side for a long time.

The word "Palestine" comes from the Philistines. The Greeks called the region "Philistia." Over time, that became our word "Palestine." Palestine is just another name for the land of Canaan. The Israelites controlled most of Palestine for about seven centuries. They split into two kingdoms – a northern kingdom, with its capital in Samaria (modern-day Nablus, in the West Bank), and a southern capital, with its capital in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC; the southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC. The Babylonians fell to the Persians; the Persians fell to the Greeks; and the Greeks fell to the Romans. Empires often moved people around after conquering a region. Many Jews had been carried off into exile by the Babylonians, but under the Persians some were allowed to return. By the time of Jesus, many Jews were living in and around Jerusalem, and in Galilee to the north, but there was a wide diversity of people throughout Palestine. The city of Gaza, which is mentioned in the New Testament, was inhabited by a mixture of Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, Jews, Egyptians, Persians, and Bedouins.

In 66 AD, just a few decades after Jesus, some Jews revolted against Rome; this led to a seven-year war, which was utterly catastrophic for the Jews. Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans, and then destroyed. A second revolt that began in 132 was also catastrophic for the Jews. Many Jews were killed; many others were removed from the land or sold into slavery. Rome rebuilt Jerusalem as a pagan colony, with a temple to the Roman god Jupiter. Gaza was also filled with temples to Roman gods during this period. From that point forward, all the way to the 20th century, there weren't many Jews living in Palestine. The Romans controlled the land for the next several hundred years. Christianity slowly came to become the dominant religion in the empire, and in the fourth century many Christian churches were built in Palestine, including the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (now in the West Bank), and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – the holy tomb of Jesus – in Jerusalem.

In 634, Muslims from Arabia invaded Palestine. Islam was a new religion; its founder, Muhammad, had died just two years before that invasion began. Muhammad traced his lineage back to Ishmael, the first son of the biblical patriarch Abraham, and Muhammad's teachings were similar to and grew out of the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to the Quran, the holy book of Islam, Muhammad had a spiritual experience in the year 621 in which he travelled by night from Mecca in Arabia to the temple in Jerusalem, and then he ascended from there into the heavens, where he met Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus, and other people from our scriptures. Jerusalem was already a holy site for Jews and Christians; now it was holy for Muslims as well. The Muslims completed their conquest of Palestine in 638. Fifty years later they built the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, at the site where they believed Muhammad ascended into heaven. They also built the al-Aqsa Mosque on the same site. The Dome is a shrine, and the Mosque is a house of worship. Both the Dome and the Mosque still stand, with some modifications, today. For the next several hundred years, Christians were allowed to visit the holy sites in Jerusalem. But over time tensions escalated between Christians and Muslims, and in 1009 the Muslim ruler ordered the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That led to the Crusades, a series of religious wars over the next 200 years that were initiated and supported by the church to regain the Holy Land. When the Crusades finally ended, in the year 1291, Muslims still had control over Palestine, including both Jerusalem and Gaza.

The next several centuries were relatively peaceful; the Muslims governed benevolently. The city of Gaza flourished; the inhabitants built mosques, colleges, hospitals, and roadside inns. The

Muslims also allowed Jews to return to the land – they had previously been expelled by the Christian Crusaders – so Jewish communities began to grow in both Jerusalem and Gaza. In 1516 the Ottoman Turks conquered Palestine, but they, like their predecessors, governed peaceably, and Gaza continued to prosper. By 1838 it was larger than Jerusalem. A slow but steady stream of Jews from Europe kept arriving in the land, so by the year 1900 Jews comprised a majority of the population of Jerusalem.

Now before we move on to the 20th century, let's take a moment to think. By this point Palestine, and the cities of Jerusalem and Gaza, had been conquered and re-conquered *many* times. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all had holy sites in Jerusalem. The Crusades were terrible, but for several centuries *before* and for about six centuries *after*, things were relatively peaceful in Palestine. People of different faiths and ethnicities were co-existing pretty well. That changed after World War I.

In 1917, during the War, Britain captured Palestine. The British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, wrote a letter in which he committed Britain to “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” At that point, Arabs who had been living in Palestine for generations made up more than 90% of its population. Many were Muslim; some were Christian. Over the next couple decades Britain helped a large number of Jews settle in Palestine – many of them fleeing the growing Nazi threat in Europe. Britain confiscated land that belonged to Palestinians and gave it to these Jewish settlers. By 1936 the Palestinians were unhappy and restless; they launched a general strike, withheld tax payments to the British government, and boycotted Jewish products. Britain brutally repressed those protests: thousands of people were arrested, villages were bombed, homes were demolished, and more than 5,000 Palestinians were killed. The practice of destroying the homes of Palestinians who caused trouble began under the British and continues in Israel to this day.

Following World War II, and in the wake of the Holocaust, the United Nations approved a plan to partition Palestine into separate states. 42% of the land, including Gaza, would become a Palestinian nation; 55%, including most of the fertile region near the coast, would become a Jewish nation; the remaining 3%, the area around Jerusalem, would be under international control. Many Palestinians thought the plan was unfair, and fighting broke out between Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Jewish nationalists who wanted *more* of the land (remember God's promise to Abraham!) formed militia groups that destroyed 500 cities, towns, and villages where Palestinians lived. 15,000 Palestinians were killed, and 700,000 had to flee. Their descendants – six million of them! – continue to live in 58 refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Palestinians call this the Nakba – “the catastrophe.” Because of those militia groups, when Israel was established in 1948, it claimed 78% of Palestine – 23% *more* than the United Nations partition plan. The day after Israel declared independence, several neighboring Arab states invaded Israel, in part because of the tragic plight of the Palestinians in Israel. That Arab-Israeli war lasted ten months. When it was over, Egypt controlled the area around Gaza, and Jordan controlled the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem. 150,000 Palestinians remained in the new state of Israel, but they were denied citizenship for the next 20 years. The United Nations told Israel to permit the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, but Israel instead passed laws that prevented the Palestinians from doing that or from claiming their property. And the Palestinian state that the United Nations had envisioned never came into being.

In 1967, in the space of just six days, Israel captured the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. More than 20,000 Palestinians died (compared to less than 1,000 Israelis), and about 300,000 Palestinians in the West Bank fled or were forced to leave, including many Christians. Those Palestinians who remained in the newly-captured lands were not given any civic rights. So Palestinians began

organizing themselves into different groups, each with different ideologies and goals. The two most important at the moment are Fatah, a Palestinian nationalist political party, which was founded in 1959; and Hamas, an Islamist political and military organization, founded in 1987. The United Nations began passing numerous resolutions pertaining to the plight of the Palestinian people, many of which Israel has ignored. All of this has resulted in many conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis since the 1970s. Among those were the First Intifada, which began in 1987 and ended in 1993 with the Oslo Accords. Israel agreed to allow Palestinians to govern their own affairs in Gaza and Jericho (in the West Bank), but a separate state for the Palestinians was still not created. The Second Intifada, which was dramatically more violent than the first, erupted in 2000 and lasted five years. Eventually, an agreement was reached to end the violence, and both parties re-committed themselves to a road map to peace, which the United States had helped broker and which would have resulted, finally, in the creation of a Palestinian state. However, that process became deadlocked, and eventually collapsed.

In 2006, Hamas gained a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council. A brief civil war erupted in Gaza in 2007 between Hamas and Fatah. Fatah lost, and the more militant Hamas now controls the Gaza Strip. Israel has been enforcing a complete blockade of Gaza since 2007, on land, in the air, and at sea. The people of Gaza have been trapped, unable to leave, for sixteen years. Hamas has attacked Israel five times since then: in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, and now 2023. Please be aware that many Gazans do not support the Hamas leadership, that nearly half of the population of Gaza is under the age of 18, that 45% of the working-age population of Gaza is unemployed, and that 64% of the households in Gaza experience food insecurity. All of that was true *before* the events of the past week.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Fatah governs those portions that the Palestinians are allowed to administer. But about 700,000 Israelis live in about 250 settlements that comprise about 390 square miles of land that have been taken from the Palestinians. I've been to one of those settlements. It's beautiful! But it *shouldn't exist*. All these settlements are considered *illegal* under international law. Many experts think there is no longer any realistic hope for a two-state solution in Palestine. Israel has simply occupied too much of the land. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for now is a *one-state* solution in which Palestinians have the same rights and privileges and opportunities that Israelis have.

But could the Israelis and the Palestinians truly live in peace? Christians, Muslims and some Jews *used* to share the land, in relative peace, for *hundreds of years*, before 1917. But after everything that has happened ... is it even *conceivable* now? Which brings me to the one verse from scripture that I think *most* applies to this whole situation. Something Jesus said, just one line, in his Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers." (Matt. 5:9) Israel and Gaza desperately need peacemakers. Too many people on both sides want to *blast the other side to smithereens*. And too many of us *outside* Israel and Gaza want to *take sides*. There are even Christians here in the U.S. who *want* a big war in the Holy Land, because they think it will hasten the return of Jesus Christ. No – that is *not* the Way! Jesus said, "Blessed are the *peacemakers*," not the warmongers. If you're a parent, and you've got two children who routinely harm each other, the *last* thing you should do is *pick a side*. Both of your children are wounded; both are hurting; both are angry. The Israelis and the Palestinians have both experienced *generations* of trauma – the Jews from centuries of persecution, and the Holocaust; the Palestinians from everything that has been taken away from them since 1917. You want peace? A *real* peace? First you have to *stop the violence*. Then you have to *tend to their wounds* – their *physical* wounds, and their *emotional* wounds. Then you have to help them *talk* with each other, to build a positive future together. None of that is going to be easy. "Blessed are the peacemakers," indeed....

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