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SIX LESSONS TO UNLOCKING THE TRUTH
TO GOD'S HOLY LAND



ISRAEL IS IMPORTANT

I'm excited about today and the next several weeks because today, we start a new sermon series. Together, we will examine the people of Israel, the nation of Israel, and the promise of Israel in our modern world. You see, Israel is more than just a subject from history. You might say that Israel the focus of history.

Why should we care about Israel? Because God does! Pastor Jack Hayford once said, "Israel is a land about which God says uniquely, prophetically, redemptively, and repeatedly in the Bible, 'This is Mine.' God refers to Israel as He does to no other land on Earth. Israel was raised up to be a light to the Gentiles." More than a dozen times in the Old Testament God clearly states that the land of Israel—and the people of Israel—are His.*

We think of Israel as a *nation* (and we should) but Israel was first a *promise* from God to the whole world. God made this promise to one man and from that one man came a family of people. Then came a nation, and in our modern times Israel is still a vital part of God's work. It is the subject of prophecy fulfilled. The mere fact that the country of Israel exists today is both a miracle and the fulfillment of many of God's promises.

Perhaps you've not given much thought to this topic. Perhaps you've taken for granted the existence of the nation of Israel because Israel has been the nation for nearly 70 years. In fact, April 19 of this year, Israel celebrates its 70th anniversary. The story of how Israel became a nation just after World War II, after more than six million Jews were killed in concentrations camps. This story of return is an exciting and important story for the followers of Jesus to understand and appreciate.

So in the coming weeks we will look at Israel from six different perspectives. To help us organize these perspectives let's use the name Israel as an acrostic:

Israel is ***Important***;

Israel is a ***State***;

Israel teaches us about ***Righteous giving***;

Israel teaches us about ***Aliyah***—the Hebrew word that means return;

As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we must become ***Educated*** (and educate others) about Israel;

Israel provides us for us an opportunity to ***Love*** our neighbours.

Put them together they spelled "ISRAEL." When this series is finished, I hope the very word "Israel" will bring to mind all that God wants us to know about our role as Christians and our relationship with the nation of Israel. Today we begin by understanding that *Israel is Important*: to God, to us, and to the world!

It seems fitting that we should start by talking about the importance of Israel. Israel is important biblically, it's important historically, and it's important politically on the world stage.

Let's start by talking about the importance of Israel in the biblical narrative. In Genesis 12:1–3 we are introduced to a groundbreaking relationship and world-changing promise. God, the creator of the universe, selects one man from all the people of the earth. That man is Abraham. Aside from the work of Jesus, the mission God gives Abraham is perhaps the most unique mission anyone has ever received. Along with this mission God makes an astonishing series of promises.

The LORD had said to Abraham, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)

These verses introduce us to Abraham *and* to the beginning God's of redemptive plan for all people everywhere. Look at how each verse reveals God's plan: In verse one, God commands Abraham to do three things: to leave this country, to leave his family and his people, and to go to the land that God will show him.

In return, God makes these promises: God promises to make Abraham into a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great. That's three commands and three promises—but God does not stop there. God promises more. God promises to bless anyone who blesses Abraham (also to curse anyone who curses him), and, most important of all, God promises that all people of the earth—everywhere and in every age—will be blessed because of Abraham. These three short verses are packed with so many things we should learn about God and His promises, but you might be asking what does this have to do with Israel?

Abraham's grandson is a man named Jacob, a man whose experiences with God are so many, so varied, so rich, and so breathtaking, that God changes Jacob's name to *Israel*. You see, when the Book of Genesis first mentions Israel, it is referring to a man, Jacob. From Jacob comes 12 sons, which lead us to the 12 tribes of Israel. In the Book of Exodus, the people of Israel find themselves enslaved and then miraculously rescued by God. It is in Exodus that the *people* of Israel become a *nation*. This is worth taking note of: Israel was first of man, then a family, then a tribe, and then a nation.

The nation of Israel is the direct result of God's promise to bless all the peoples of the earth. That means when God wanted to show His love to the world, he began the process by creating the nation of Israel. Now, as Christians we understand the nation of Israel is the nation into which Jesus of Nazareth was born. And Jesus is the blessing God spoke of when He spoke to Abraham. Jesus is God's blessing for everyone in the world. But that blessing was first made possible by the creation of the nation of Israel.

The Old Testament story continues beyond Genesis and Exodus through the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and through the prophet Malachi. But, we should keep in mind that the Old Testament story is the story of *Israel*. It is Israel into which Jesus is born and becomes the sacrifice for the entire world. That's one thing that makes Israel so important. Israel is the setting for God's great promise to all the world: Jesus.

Secondly, it's not just the *people* of Israel who are important. It's the very *land*, the geography that we call Israel today. When God made these promises to Abraham, God also promised a particular piece of the earth, a small slice of land no bigger than the state of New Jersey, and He promised Abraham that this land would always belong to him and his descendants. **The *people* of Israel are important, and so is the *land* of Israel.** God promised this land to Abraham. Centuries later, God repeated His promise through the words of Moses in Exodus 12:25, "When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony." And God repeats the promise over and over and over again throughout the history of Israel.

That's why the 70th anniversary of the modern nation of Israel is so important. For nearly 2,000 years, the descendants of Abraham were driven away from the land God had promised. Many nations and many rulers tried to undo what God had done. But God remembers His promises, and after World War II—and the Holocaust—the people of Israel returned to the land of Israel and reclaimed the promise that God had made thousands of years before.

The story of Israel becoming a nation again after nearly two millennia is perhaps the greatest story in the history of men and nations. What group of people become dispossessed from their land and left to wander the face of the earth for centuries have ever returned and reestablished a nation? Only Israel. The people of Israel were scattered too far. The centuries have been too long. No one ever thought that Israel would be a nation again. But God remembered His promise and moved on behalf of His promised people so they could inherit the land of promise. This rebirth of the nation of Israel was prophesied in Isaiah 66: 8-10.

Who has ever heard of such things?
 Who has ever seen things like this?
 Can a country be born in a day
 or a nation be brought forth in a moment?
 Yet no sooner is Zion in labour
 than she gives birth to her children.
 Do I bring to the moment of birth
 and not give delivery?" says the LORD.
 "Do I close up the womb
 when I bring to delivery?" says your God.
 "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her,
 all you who love her;
 rejoice greatly with her,
 all you who mourn over her.

Isaiah describes the birth of a nation in a single day! After the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Roman Empire destroyed the city of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It was not until 1948 that Israel found a place again on the world map. That's a span of 1,878 years! Yet on May 14, 1948, Israel became a nation again.

The story of the rebirth of Israel is too big to tell in one sermon, but any student of history will tell you that the events surrounding the birth of Israel in modern times are nothing short of miraculous. Israel was opposed by all of her neighbours. And the rest of the world stood back to see whether this new nation could survive. And it did! That date is Israel's Independence Day! We will go into more detail about this in next week's message, "Israel is a State." But for now, it's vital that we realize Israel is not only important biblically, it is also important historically. And because of this importance, we should pay attention to the welfare of the nation of Israel.

Finally, there are modern, practical reasons Israel is important.

Israel is an island of democracy in the Middle East. From the rebirth of Israel, the nation has always been a democracy. While no nation is perfect in all its actions, the democratic government of Israel aligns with the democratic values of Canada, and I would say, with God's values of freedom and equality. Democratic governments can grow into the kind of nations that respect the rights of all people, which is one foundation for peace. For example, did you know that people of Arab descent—and the Muslim faith—make up nearly 20% of the citizens in Israel? What other Middle East nation welcomes, protects, and *grants citizenship* to people of other races and religions? This is not merely a North American value; it is a godly value.

Perhaps you may be thinking, "Pastor, that sounds very political." And perhaps it is political, but as Christians we are called to support godly values and practices. As Christians, we are commanded to care about social justice and godly government. We should speak up about issues of equality and care for the poor, whether in Canada or among our allies. The modern nation of Israel listens to the voice of American Christians as we urge Israel to fulfill her godly calling. In the Middle East, Jerusalem is the "city set on a hill," capable of living up to the calling it has always had.

Our Lord loved Jerusalem and Israel. When He entered the city on Palm Sunday, He affirmed His love, even though the people of Israel had fallen short of their full potential:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" (Luke 13:34).

Today, we can learn from the Lord's example. Jesus did not reject Israel, but instead sacrificed Himself on her behalf. Jesus loved Israel and stood by Israel. Should we not do the same?

Here are two things we can do as we begin this series on the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel:

- **Pray for the peace of Jerusalem and the safety of Israel.** Our prayers can make a difference! This is practical support that Christians can provide. Prayer also has the ability to soften our own hearts and to allow us to hear the Lord's voice. How do you think God feels about Israel today? Has He abandoned her? Of course not!
- **Take a stand for the truth, but do so lovingly.** Refuse to be drawn into pointless arguments about Israel or the Middle East. To support Israel does not mean that we are against Arab nations. As Christians we can stand for Israel without standing against others. Indeed, this is part of demonstrating our commitment to both truth *and* love. As this message draws to a close, listen to the wise counsel of Pastor Jack Hayford once more: "God has no disposition against any human being, certainly not Arabs who are the offspring of, Ishmael, the other son of His chosen leader Abraham. Standing for Israel doesn't require an anti-Arab stance and doesn't require us to be loveless toward other peoples."

* Pastor: you may want to consider having these verses available as a handout, or perhaps referring to one or more of them at this point in the sermon.

- Genesis 17:7-8: When God re-affirmed His blessings to Abraham, God included the *land* of Israel. "*I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.*"
- Leviticus 25:23: God says the land is His, to do with as He sees fit: "*The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine ...*"
- Deuteronomy 32:43: "*Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people ... He will provide atonement for His land and His people.*"
- 2 Chronicles 7:20: God says if the people are faithless he will "... *I will uproot them from My land which I have given them ...*"
- Psalm 85:1-2: "*Lord, You have been favourable to Your land; You have brought back the captivity of Jacob. You have forgiven the iniquity of Your people; You have covered all their sin.*"
- Isaiah 8:8: The Messiah and this land are connected: "... *and the stretching out of his wings will fill the breadth of Your land, O Immanuel.*"
- Jeremiah 2:7: Jeremiah prophetically explains *why* the land of Israel is destroyed. "*I brought you into a bountiful country ...but when you entered, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.*"
- Ezekiel 38:16: Many scholars consider Ezekiel's world to be end-times prophecy: "*You will come up against My people Israel ... I will bring you against My land, so that the nations may know Me, when I am hallowed in you ...*"
- Joel 1:6, 2:18, 3:2: Three separate references in Joel: "*For a nation has come up against My land ...*" (1:6) "*Then the Lord will be zealous for His land ...*" (2:18) "*I will gather all nations, and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; and I will enter into judgment with them there on account of My people, My heritage Israel, Whom they have scattered among the nations; they have also divided up My land.*" (3:2)
- Hosea 9:3: When the people of Israel are scattered, they are scattered from the land: "*They shall not dwell in the Lord's land, but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and shall eat unclean things in Assyria.*"
- Zechariah 9:16: "*The Lord their God will save them in that day, as the flock of His people, for they shall be like the jewels of a crown, lifted like a banner over His land ...*"