

## The Peace Of Jerusalem

Seventy-two years ago a small but highly motivated army of Jews invaded and conquered Palestine. They set up a Jewish government, which was quickly recognized by President Truman and they renamed the land Israel. This set off a chain of regional conflicts fueled by hostility that goes back for thousands of years—and still goes on today. A treaty forged by President Carter between Egypt and Israel unraveled with the deposing of Hosni Mubarek. Iran, along with their client Hezbollah, has threatened and continues to threaten to wipe Israel off the face of the map. Israel keeps open the option of launching a first strike against the uranium-processing facilities in Iran. Isis pursues their goal of establishing a world-wide caliphate through holy war and imposing universal Sharia law. Sunnis hate Shiites, Shiites hate Sunnis and they both hate the Kurds, the Persians, the Jews and the Americans. Peace in the Mideast is, to say the least, elusive. There's an old joke in diplomatic circles about the elusiveness of peace in the Mideast. A scorpion asks a dog to carry him across a river on his back. "No way," says the dog. "*If I let you crawl on my back you'll sting me and kill me.*" "Why would I do that?" The scorpion asked. "*if I stung you, you'd sink and I would drown.*" So the dog agreed and the scorpion crawled on his back and they started across the river. Halfway across, the scorpion stung the dog. As the dog began to convulse and sink, he cried out: "*why did you do that? Now we're both going to die!*" "Because," said the scorpion, "*this is the Mideast.*" In the Mideast, suicide in the service of killing one's enemies is honored. Of course, killing each other isn't exclusively a "Mideast" problem; people have been killing each other ever since Cain murdered his brother Abel. But perhaps nowhere has systematized killing—which we call warfare—been going on with as much persistence and determination and zeal as it has in the Mideast, which, ironically, is the cradle of civilization. People kill each other there even if it means destroying themselves in the process—as the joke about the dog and the scorpion so eloquently portrays.

At the epicenter of this violent part of the world is the land which has gone under several different names throughout history: Canaan, Israel, Judea, Palestine—now, once again, Israel. Kings and their armies have fought over this land for 10,000 years, going back to 6000 years before Abraham. It is said that more battles have been fought on what is called the "Plain of Sharon," a rich agricultural area in northern Israel, than at any other place on earth. In Israel the Plain is referred to as, "the place of being cut down." In the middle of the plain is a small mountain called Mount Meggido, where excavations have revealed stables and barracks where King Solomon kept his cavalry regiments 1000 years before Christ. Perhaps that is why in the *Book of Revelation*, mount Meggido serves as a symbol of the place where the final battle between god and satan will be fought. In Hebrew, Mount Meggido is "har Meggido" or Armageddon.

What is there about Israel that makes it so desirable to rule and so prone to conflict? It is a land of stark contrasts: a dry wilderness in the south and lush farmland in the north. In the south, the Dead Sea—the lowest body of water on earth—whose water is seven times as salty as the ocean and will support no life, and in the north, the Sea of Galilee, whose fresh waters are teeming with life. The ruins of buried cities called "Tels" that haven't seen life for 8000 years stand side by side with modern cities where international business thrives. Israel is a land of the living and a land of the dead. Arabs and Jews live side by side and vote at the same polls, but lack any sense of community.

Moslems strive to obey the Koran, the law book given to them by their Prophet Mohammed. They pray ritually five times a day, make pilgrimages to Mecca and find the idea of grace laughable. They harbor deep and bitter resentment over Jewish sovereignty in the land they call Palestine and consider their homeland. The Jews strive to obey the Mosaic dietary, civil and moral laws, but can't worship in the way God provided through the Levitical sacrifices because what is left of their temple lies buried under a Moslem mosque called the dome of the rock, whose glittering golden dome serves as a continual reminder of the destruction of their temple almost two thousand years ago. The prophet Jeremiah said, "*Peace, peace, the people say, but there is no peace.*" Now over 2700 years have passed since Jeremiah spoke those words and there is still no peace.

But peace did come to Jerusalem 2000 years ago—not as a "what" but as a "who." But the same people who were crying out for peace didn't recognize the one who brought it when he arrived. He was the one Micah had said would come from Bethlehem and would be *our peace*. When he arrived, armies of angels descended upon the place of his birth and sang of the peace he brought. But most of the people rejected the peace-bringer, and along with him, the peace he brought. Jesus alone can bring peace us peace—the only real peace we can know in this life, and that is peace between ourselves and God. Without his peace—the peace that comes with the forgiveness of our sins—we are doomed to live under the law, continually striving to get the better of each other and defending ourselves against those who try to get the better of us—all under the eye of a God we can only view as a judge and not a savior. Without Jesus, we live our lives as if we were in a gigantic courtroom, accusing others of being guilty and considering ourselves justified, and never finding peace. Jesus is the only one who can give us peace. Without him, we are polarized particles, perfectly competitive, perfectly repellent, and perfectly alone. We can even come to think that the only peace we can have in this world is that which we have when we are alone.

But solitude is not peace. Solitude may be the absence of conflict, but it is not peace. Peace, or "shalom," as it is called in the Hebrew of the *Torah* is not merely the absence of conflict: it is the presence of complete harmony between man and God. *Peace is the presence of Christ—the one and only bridge between us and God.* Peace is not found in building walls of suspicion and cynicism to keep others out. Peace is found in a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to create peace between us and other members of the body of Christ on earth--the Church.

On the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee lie the ruins of three ancient cities whose inhabitants refused to repent and believe in Jesus Christ when he appeared among them proclaiming that the kingdom of God had arrived and inviting them to enter it. Even the citizens of ancient Nineveh—terribly wicked Nineveh—had repented when Jonah came to their city and preached a seven word sermon to them: "*forty days and Nineveh will be overturned.*" (Please don't let that give you any ideas about seven word sermons!) But Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum refused to repent and believe the Gospel even when it was brought to them by the lord himself. Their ruins lie as silent monuments to the doom that awaits all those who refuse to take the narrow way that leads to life and choose by the broad way that leads to destruction. All that is left of Korazin and Bethsaida are blackened stones strewn down a hillside.

Capernaum consists mostly of rubble buried under sand and dirt. You can't look at them without sensing the unshakeable power of God's Word—the Word which our Lord said cannot be broken. Wherever the Gospel is rejected the demons of death rush in and leave chaos in their wake. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so does the human spirit. Where the Lord isn't present something else is present, and that "something else" is not peace and harmony, but something called "entropy": the relentless decay of creation that sin brought into the world that rules the human mind and the human heart when God is not there. But whenever the Gospel finds a home in a human heart, entropy is reversed; life springs up and shalom reigns between man and God.

The true Jerusalem—the New Jerusalem of God—is not a city made by human hands that stands on Mount Zion in the nation of Israel. It is a heavenly city that overflows heaven and spills down into our world. Its citizens are not only the saints and martyrs who have gone before us, but all those who have placed their faith in its king—the Prince of Peace. As we sing in one of our hymns: *"glorious things of you are spoken, Zion city of our God; he whose Word cannot be broken formed you for his own abode; on the rock of ages founded, what can shake your sure repose? With salvation's walls surrounded, you may smile at all your foes "This is the Lord's promise to all who dwell in his city, the New Jerusalem of God: "rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her all you who love her; I will extend peace to her like a river and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream."* Lord help us all to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Amen.