

Dear Class Member,

The breakout of armed hostilities between Israel and Gaza this month seems to many as but another chapter in a problem that continues to resist solution. Our review of that situation gives us an opportunity to consider intransigent problems in our own lives, and to look for what help the scriptures may offer on those issues. So that will be the topic of our next class.

The Wired Word continue to be for use in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.

The Present Word adult class and youth Sunday school classes resume in-person following our Sunday school COVID-19 Safety Guidelines: (http://www.sprucc.org/docs/Worship/ReOpenPlan_SundaySchool_201013.pdf) on Sundays at 9:00am on May 9, 16, & 23.

We continue to have 9:00am Tuesday morning Zoom Bible studies with Zion UCC:
<http://www.sprucc.org/classes/adultstudygroups.html#ZionUCCBibleStudy>.

Sunday evenings there is a six week series book discussion with Zion UCC of *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges & Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* by Zoom from 6:30-7:30pm on April 18 & 25; May 2 & 9 (no class on May 16); and 6:30-8:00pm on May 23. Info at: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-aevents/recentaupcomingevents.html#PostQuarantine>.



Israel-Gaza Conflict: No End in Sight

The Wired Word for the Week of May 23, 2021

In the News

As of this writing (on Wednesday), there is no indication that the armed conflict between Israel and the Hamas ruling party in Gaza that began May 10 after four years of relative quiet is nearing an end.

The conflict was triggered after weeks of rising Israeli-Palestinian tension that culminated in confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli police at a holy site revered by Muslims and Jews in East Jerusalem, but May 10 is when Hamas -- which Israel, the United States and other Western countries consider a terrorist group -- began firing rockets into Israel from Gaza -- over 3,000 in the first week. Israel's counter-rocket Iron Dome system limited damage, but dozens of rockets still got through. Israel responded with air strikes and artillery fire at Hamas concentrations and infrastructure.

Heavy exchanges of fire have continued as the conflict moves into its second week. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said there was no clear end in sight to the violence.

"We'll do whatever it takes to restore order and quiet," Netanyahu said, adding, "It will take some time."

Speaking for the other side in the conflict, Moussa Abu Marzouk, deputy leader of Hamas, said that if a ceasefire is to happen, "it will be reached with our conditions, not Israeli conditions. If Israel does not want to stop, we will not stop."

As of Wednesday, at least 12 people in Israel, including two children, have died in rocket attacks fired from Gaza. Palestinian authorities say Israel's airstrikes and shelling have killed at least 213 people, including 61 children. Many others have been injured.

Representatives of the United States, Qatar, Egypt and others have tried to broker a ceasefire, but so far, no movement in that direction appears to have occurred.

Although many people assume the clash between Israelis and Palestinians has been going on for centuries, the roots of it go back only about 100 years. And rather than being a confrontation of religious ideologies -- Judaism and Islam -- it is primarily a fight between two groups who claim the right to the same land.

We have no space here to summarize the history of the conflict but for excellent overviews, we refer you to the links list below and recommend you either view the *Vox* video (just over 10 minutes long) or read the text from *Medium* (an eight-minute read).

Two salient factors are in the background of the current conflict:

- Many Palestinians and their leaders refuse to acknowledge Israel's right to exist.
- After years of negotiations, including the work of mediators from other countries, failed, Israel's leaders have concluded, rightly or wrongly, that the Palestinians would never want peace in the region, so that it is useless to negotiate further. Instead, Israel has since focused on keeping the Palestinians in check.

Meanwhile, however, many noncombatants on both sides are injured or killed as the two sides pursue their goals.

Note: *The current armed conflict is ongoing and could change quickly. Check world news sources for updates.*

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Ceasefire Still Elusive in Israel-Gaza Fighting.](#) *Reuters*

[After Years of Quiet, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Exploded. Why Now?](#) *Yahoo News*

[The Israel-Palestine Conflict: a Brief, Simple History.](#) *Vox* (video)

[A Brief and Simple History of the Israel-Palestine Conflict.](#) *Medium* (text)

[What Does Hamas Really Want?](#) *Religion News Service* (opinion)

[The Disease of Settler Colonialism and Apartheid.](#) *Aljazeera* (opinion)

['The Wound Is Much Deeper Than Before' -- Mohammad Darawshe on Arab-Jewish Violence.](#) *Forward* (opinion)

Applying the News Story

Although the Israel-Palestinian conflict has been a reality in one form or another for only about 100 years, that means for us who are alive today, there's been no peace in that part of the world for our entire lifetime. Hence, we can be forgiven for thinking the conflict has been going on *forever*. That's certainly what it feels like.

What's more, 100 years *is* a long time. And along the way, multiple opportunities for peaceful settlements have been rebuffed or squandered (or as was once said of Yasser Arafat when he led the Palestinians, he never "missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity").

Thus, those of us not directly affected by that conflict are likely to either ignore it or view it as verification of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:6 -- "you will hear of wars and rumors of wars" -- and decide that nothing can be done, the matter is unsolvable, and say, along with Shakespeare's Mercutio, "A plague on both your houses."

We may approach some closer-to-home problems similarly: relationships that aren't working out, teenagers in rebellion, persons with addictions, jobs we hate, etc.

Today's discussion invites us to think about the seemingly intransigent circumstances of life -- the problems that stubbornly refuse to move toward resolution no matter how much effort we put into them -- and consider what the Bible has to say about such things.

The Big Questions

1. Given that this is God's world, are we ever justified in declaring a situation hopeless? Explain.
2. What does it mean to live by faith when surrounded by troubles that seem beyond solution?
3. If you had the power to do so, would you make all problems solvable? Why or why not?
4. Is it necessary when seeking to end a conflict to delineate who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys"? If yes, why? If no, why not? Are those categories even helpful in terms of going forward?
5. Is there a justification for war and death in the name of faith?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Habakkuk 1:2-3

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise. (For context, read 1:1--2:3.)*

Habakkuk likely lived during the final years of the kingdom of Judah, not long before the Babylonians conquered Judah and sent the Judahites into exile..

The book of Habakkuk is a sort of transcript of a conversation between the prophet and God. Habakkuk asked God, Why do you allow evil and injustice to go unpunished? Specifically, Habakkuk asked that question related to a general moral and spiritual decline in Judah itself, and the resulting chaos in the society.

Habakkuk apparently had been praying about the perverse situation in Judah for some time, for the book opens with the prophet asking, "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?"

Habakkuk wanted to know why his prayer had not been answered. Why was God allowing Habakkuk's fellow citizens to carry on in their sinful ways and not putting a stop to it?

God eventually answered the prophet's question, but Habakkuk didn't like the answer. God said that he was going to use the Babylonians-Chaldeans to punish Judah for her sins. That nation would invade Judah, God said, and it would be the arm of God's judgment.

But God's answer raised a larger issue: Why would God use people who were even *less* righteous than the people of Judah to punish the Judahites?

God answered that, in time, the Babylonians would be defeated as well.

But beyond that fact, God's answer pointed to a larger settling of the scores and of righting the wrongs -- an ultimate fulfillment of all things righteous and good. God told Habakkuk, "For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (2:3). And it was in that context that God told Habakkuk that the righteous live by faith (2:4).

In other words, God was telling Habakkuk that he would continue to live in a time when justice would be hard to find, but he should trust the vision of a fully just time yet to come. "If it seems to tarry, wait for it." Thus, living by faith meant for Habakkuk carrying on in belief in that vision.

That answer must have satisfied Habakkuk, for he then prayed, and his prayer includes one of the most powerful statements of trust in God found anywhere in the Bible:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD ... (3:17-19)*

Questions: When have you prayed for help and felt that the prayer was unanswered? In that context, what does it mean that the righteous live by faith? Do you ever feel that being told to "live by faith" sounds good as far as it goes, but still leaves you wishing God would just reach down and point out the villains for our convenience and then wipe out the troublemakers and leave the nice people behind? What, if anything, is wrong with *that* vision?

Isaiah 2:4

*[The Lord] shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. (For context, read 2:1-4.)*

One of the important points implicit in this prophecy is not that God himself will force peace, but that when people allow themselves to be instructed by God, they themselves will transform their weapons into agricultural tools.

Questions: Does peace require the recognition of a common and central authority? Does peace require some to put aside their personal or national goals for a common good? What might inspire people to do that?

Psalms 71:20

You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again. (For context, read 71:1-24.)

This psalmist had a high respect for God, whom he understood as being sovereign over *everything*. Thus, he attributed even his troubles and calamities to God. But note his confidence in God's ultimate goodness: "from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again."

The psalmist lived with adversity (vv. 10-11), but he also lived in constant trust and hope that issued in praise (vv. 5-6, 14-17, 19-24). Psalm 71 reminds us that faith always lives amidst troubles. Praise is not the celebration of the powerful and the prosperous; rather, it is the language and the lifestyle of those who know at all times and in every circumstance that their lives belong to God and that their futures depend on God.

Questions: How would you apply this verse to the intransigent problems of your life? Where do you find room to praise God amid your troubles? Why?

Romans 8:26

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (For context, read 6:18-30.)

When we are praying about the troubles that persist in our lives, we may sometimes feel so overwhelmed or so frustrated that we don't even know what to ask God for -- or if we think we know, we may not have the larger picture in mind and our petition may be shortsighted. Thus, the apostle Paul tells us that God's Spirit helps us in our weakness; and the Spirit intercedes on our behalf.

Question: What is your response to this suggestion: "In some cases, maybe all we can pray is 'God help us,' and leave it to the Spirit to fill in the blanks"?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, from TWW team member Bill Tammeus: "I was in and around Jerusalem in late 1957 on my family's way home from living in India for two years, and I recall seeing refugee camps in the area (the area was Jordan and Jerusalem still was a divided city). I recall being told how people my age (almost 13) lived in such camps without real schools or many of the things I thought of as necessities. And even then I knew that you can't do that to children without creating in them a fierce sense of anger -- anger that at some point would explode and create yet more turmoil and anger."
2. Comment on this, from TWW team member Liz Antonson: "The 'can do no wrong' stance in favor of Israel is suspect, in my opinion. Secular Israel is rife with nationalism. With the level of corruption in Israeli politics, I doubt if the Will of Jehovah or the Laws in the Torah are being honored. Hamas is a wretched terrorist group but not all Palestinians are Hamas or embrace terrorism. It upsets me when my Christian friends cheer the deaths of Palestinians. This broad brush that paints all Palestinians as bad and in need of eradication fails to take into consideration that women and children are paying with life and limb because of the lack of vision that bombs are not the only thing that can affect peace. I have had friends express anger toward me because I pray for the death and maiming to cease *on both sides!*"
3. Discuss this from TWW team member Malia Miller: "I am reading some of Marcus Borg's work in his book *The Heart of Christianity*. He speaks of the fact that personal spiritual transformation is central to all of the major world religions -- in other words, we should focus on what we have in common more than what we do not. The history of violence in [the Middle East] is the antithesis of what each religion teaches, yet it seems impossible to achieve."
To which TWW team member Mary Sells added, "... and then God scratched his head that three great religions were landed on the same place, to root all peoples as one who believe in one God -- the I Am. But the people failed to see either the magic or irony."
4. Children appear to be a significant collateral or intentional target in this conflict. [A United Nations report](#) issued after the Hamas-Israel conflict of 2014 noted that Hamas often locates its military resources in schools or in buildings where Israeli attacks are likely to cause civilian casualties -- especially children. This serves Hamas' propaganda efforts to gain worldwide sympathy. [An editorial in the New York Post](#) commenting on the UN report stated, "Because Hamas, desperate to win world sympathy by any means, has always been happy to use Palestinian innocents as human shields -- the more casualties, the better."
How effective has this publicity strategy been? Are we more engaged and enraged when children are killed, as opposed to adults? Why or why not?
5. Consider this from a TWW consultant: "News articles and essays often assume a sort of moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas, ignoring major distinctions between the two. Israel is a relatively free and legitimate nation-state that protects the rights of its citizens -- including its Arab citizens. (Arabs -- including Muslims -- have been elected members of the Israeli parliament (Knesset) since the nation's founding.) Hamas is an internationally recognized terrorist organization that controls Gaza. Hamas engages in indiscriminate attacks that actually target civilians, and uses civilians as human shields contrary to the international laws of warfare. Israel targets Hamas' leaders and infrastructure -- and holds Hamas responsible for the deaths of their human shield hostages. There are significant moral distinctions."

Responding to the News

Mother Teresa once said that her job was not to succeed but to be faithful to her task.

If that's the case for the rest of us, then our task is to find ways to support all of those who are faithfully trying to create a peaceful enough situation to allow Israelis and Palestinians to live together in relative harmony. That can mean communicating with our lawmakers and policy setters. It can mean supporting organizations that are actively working for peace in the Middle East and agencies that are there to relieve the misery and comfort the afflicted. We can, of course, pray that turmoil in the Middle East will not be inevitable.

Pray for the victims of the conflict.

Prayer

We pray, O Lord, that you will strengthen the will and effectiveness of those on the front line of peacemaking in the Middle East. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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