

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories Issue 53 October 2023

The newsletter, which seeks to take the hopes, needs, pain and fears of both sides seriously, is available free on request to those who send their name and email address to: tony@higton.info. Please encourage others to join the mailing list.
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Hasten God's purpose for the Jewish people

A few days before my wife and I moved to Israel to live and minister in Jerusalem in 2002, the Israeli prime minister, announced "Israel is now at war with the Palestinians." So, we moved there at a difficult time. We heard the suicide bombs going off and received dreadful reports of the consequences. But it was nothing like the horror which has recently taken place. How we need to pray both for Israel and for the many innocent Palestinians.

Attacks from Gaza are not new. For example, earlier in 2023, 104 rockets were fired into Israel on one day and 40 on another day. One Israeli organisation which is critical of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians wrote "We've enforced the Gaza blockade since 2005. We limit the entry and exit of people and goods, control the air and sea, and regulate the digital sphere and population registry. In these unlivable conditions, Gaza is always on the edge, complete with sky-high unemployment and undrinkable water. So, while we claim we don't have permanent forces inside the strip, we still fully control the entire area and its population." We need to pray that Israel will treat the Palestinians correctly.

Israel certainly had the right to respond strongly to the absolutely appalling attack by Hamas. The Law of Armed Forces includes the Principle of Proportionality which allows attacks on a military target which causes incidental or collateral damage, eg to civilians, so long as the loss of life and damage to property is not excessive. The problem with Gaza is that Hamas deliberately uses civilians as shields, which, of course, causes greater loss of civilian life. A few days after the attack Hamas appealed to civilians not to listen to warnings from Israel about moving out of target buildings and areas. This appears to be an attempt by Hamas to increase civilian deaths, so creating bad PR against Israel.

However, I find it difficult to defend Israel's cutting off water supplies, medical supplies, electricity etc. I note that Israel said this could cease if Hamas released the Israeli hostages.

One of the other serious threats facing Israel is the possibility of attacks by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah is a terrorist group backed by Iran. Even before the Hamas attack, Hezbollah chief, Hassan Nasrallah, was growing emboldened and believed he could alter the balance of power with Israel. Hezbollah was intensifying preparations for an imminent confrontation with Israel before the Hamas attack. It has in the past year constructed 27 military posts along the border with Israel.

Israel has been getting closer to direct action against Iran (which is not far from producing nuclear weapons). In May 2023 Israel's military intelligence warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that their enemies, including Iran, saw the very serious political division in Israel as "a historic opportunity" to attack. That month, the Israeli government scrapped the "reasonableness" standard that allows the supreme court to overrule government decisions, if they are deemed unreasonable. However, some Israelis pointed out that other countries, such as the US don't have the equivalent of a reasonableness standard. This led to many huge demonstrations and increasingly violent street protests for 30 weeks before the Hamas attack. Over 1,000 Air Force officers and personnel threatened to stop defending the nation, as did 10,000 military reservists. A survey discovered that 58% of Israelis feared a civil war. The controversy continues. Little wonder that Israel's enemies thought this weakened Israel and gave an opportunity for attack. How we need to pray for Israel's protection from those, like Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, who want to destroy her completely.

Yes, we need to pray that Israel will treat the Palestinians properly, including in Gaza, and will correct people, including some West Bank settlers who don't. But we also need to see the big picture. Why is there so much antisemitism? Why is there such widespread hatred of Jewish people? Such hatred can only be understood if there is some very important reason for it. Why do Iran and other groups want to destroy Israel completely?

The answer is that God has a special purpose for the Jewish people and the devil is working overtime to hinder it. Many Christians believe God has finished with the Jewish people and replaced them with the church (Replacement Theology). But that is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. Paul writes in Romans 11 “Did God reject his people? By no means! God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew Again I ask: did [the Jewish people] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! . . . I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:1-2,11-12, 25-26). Bearing in mind the context, it is clear that the word “Israel” in verse 26 is not referring to the church (as some claim) but to the Jewish people. So, what Paul is foretelling is an End Time massive turning of the Jewish people to Christ. Imagine the impact of that in the world! Yes, Israel is taking some wrong actions which legitimately cause antagonism. But this prophecy is the real reason why the devil has inspired the Hamas attack, the threats from Hezbollah and from Iran. We need to pray regularly for God’s purpose for Israel – a massive turning to Christ – to happen. We need to pray against these hindrances and attempts to block God’s purpose for the Jewish people.

There are hindrances in Israel itself. A recent survey found that 45% of Israel Jews self-identified as "secular." 29% said they were Orthodox, but don’t necessarily practise the religion, and 22% said they were practising Orthodox. There has been a growth in antagonism to Christians recently and one controversial manifestation of this has been Orthodox Jews spitting in the direction of Christians. It is an old Jewish tradition of warding off evil and impurity and has led to some arrests. We need to remember that Jews have been very badly treated by the church in the past, which has, of course, made them more antagonistic towards the gospel. So, the church has been seriously hindering God’s special purpose for the Jewish people. We need to pray for God to overrule the damage caused by antisemitism in the church over the centuries.

The number of Messianic Jews who believe in Yeshua HaMashiach (Jesus the Christ) is growing around the world. It is estimated that there are some 100,000 worldwide. In Israel there are 15,000-16,000 who meet in some 130 congregations. I had a lot to do with Messianics when we were living in Israel and was inspired by what God was doing amongst them. However, the numbers are still relatively small.

I believe we need to pray for Revival amongst the Jewish people. Revival comes primarily to the church but history shows that it has a great effect on unbelievers and on secular society. One of my main priorities is to pray for God to bring revival amongst the Jewish people worldwide, in order to further his great purpose that “all Israel will be saved” i.e. that there will be a massive turning of Jewish people to Yeshua HaMashiach. This revival could well be centred on the Messianic Jewish believers but have a great effect on non-Messianic Jews.

The devil has shown his power in many ways including in the horrific, evil attack on Israel by Hamas. Let this be an incentive not only to pray for Israel’s protection but also for us to pray regularly, and passionately, that God will come in Revival to the Jewish people, to hasten the time when “all Israel will be saved.”

The re-establishment of the State of Israel by the United Nations in 1948, after an almost 2000-year gap, is nothing short of miraculous, and is a clear Sign of the End Times. A massive turning of the Jewish people to faith in Jesus would be an equally significant sign.

The explosion at the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza

We must pray for healing for the people bereaved, injured and traumatised by this terrible disaster. But we must also pray for the very dangerous implications of this event. I am aware that Israel has called for hospitals to close and has taken action which is open to criticism – temporarily cutting off essential supplies to Gaza etc. But I am convinced that the Al-Ahli hospital explosion was not caused by Israel. This is not just because of the evidence given by the Israelis that they were not responsible. My main reason is that for Israel to deliberately attack an overcrowded hospital in this way would not only be very cruel, but would be one of the most stupid and pointless ‘own goals’ in military history. For Israel to be held responsible would cause enormous damage to her reputation, greatly undermine support for her and place her in very serious danger of wider military attack. The Israelis would do all they could to avoid any such disaster.

Sadly, however, many people will never accept Israel was not to blame. This includes the Arab world which surrounds her, with which she had been achieving more positive relationship recently. The fact of the matter is that

this event puts Israel in very great danger. The Palestinians are up in arms, including those on the West Bank. Iran and its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon are making serious threats against Israel and could well take military action. If this were to happen, it would destabilise the Middle East and could create a major disaster for Israel.

So, we need to pray more than ever for Israel's safety. Palestinian extremists, Hezbollah and Iran all want to destroy Israel totally and they could well take this great opportunity to seek to bring that about in the immediate future. The devil's intention in all this is to prevent God's important purpose for the Jewish people being fulfilled.

We also need to pray for the many people in Israel and Gaza (including fellow Christians) who are suffering so dreadfully. The Israel-Gaza conflict is also seriously stirring up antisemitism, including in the UK. Pray as never before!

Tony Higton