WHY DID GOD CHOOSE *THIS* LAND?

Series: Israel or Palestine? Thinking Biblically About the Land of Israel

Selected Scriptures

Of all the places on God's green earth, why did He choose the land of Israel? Why not Morocco? India? Turkey? France? Florida? Nebraska? Don't they say Texas is the real promised land? Some beachfront property in Mexico or the Swiss alps? If it were up to me, I probably would've chose one of those. Why the geographic location of Israel? That's what we want to talk about today as we continue to study this incredibly irrelevant topic (j/k), thinking biblically about the land of Israel.

Actually, this is a pressing issue. The question of whose land it is, is not a game. We're not voting for teams here. This is a life-or-death subject in Israel and for many Jews around the world. When the extremist Palestinians say, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!" they are not talking about establishing a Palestinian state where everyone can get along. They're talking about eradicating Jews from the land and/or from existence. That's why you have a teenage Hama member calling his parents from a Jewish woman's phone during the October 7th massacre, bragging about how he killed ten Jews, sending the pics to his parents on WhatsApp, and his mother and father giving him their blessing, calling their son a hero.

Last week we made two foundational, key points regarding the land of Israel.

1) **God promised the land to Abraham (the first Jew) and his descendants (the Jews).**
2) **God ratified that promise with a unilateral, unconditional covenant.**

Today I plan to answer two questions:

1) **Why did God choose the *people* Israel?**
2) **Why did God choose the *land* that He did?**

Why this little, teeny tiny strip of land that at to us might seem insignificant? The answers go hand in hand. Honestly, today's sermon might seem more like a Sunday school lesson with a lot of pictures, but I think it will be worth it and there will be some Ah-ha! moments in it that help you understand God's purposes in choosing Israel and the land of Israel.

QUESTION #1: WHY DID GOD CHOOSE ISRAEL? (Exodus 19:5-6)

Remember that in Genesis 15 after God ratified the covenant, he said that Abraham's descendants would be *"strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years"* (Gen. 15:13). Basically, God just foretold the entire story of Jospeh and Moses and the Exodus. God predicted it and would use that time in Egypt to birth the nation. Egypt was like God's incubator for the nation. It's where they multiplied and became a nation. But after that, God said, *"in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete"* (Gen. 15:16). You might want to keep that "iniquity of the Amorite" concept in your mind for another time, but note that after the fourth generation, Moses would lead them out. We

know that they stopped at Mt. Sinai along the way, and this is where God gave them the **Law—** sometimes we call it the Mosaic Law because God gave it through the mediator Moses. The Law, including the 10 commandments and 613 other commands, was going to be their *national law*. The Law, in context, was given to **geopolitical national Israel**.

It wasn't given in a vacuum for all people, but for this geopolitical nation to govern their affairs in a God-honoring way. It was their constitution, or their law of the land. We must remember that Israel was not a democracy or republic; it was a **theocracy** where God is king. They existed as a real, physical, political kingdom in the world with Yahweh on the throne and the Law as their mode of operation—how to dwell with this holy God in their midst. And even though we've been speaking negatively of the Law in Romans because of people misusing it as a means of salvation, it was really a tremendous blessing to the nation of Israel and to the world. The Law is important to their purpose described in **Exodus 19:5-6.** This is the best description as to why God chose to use Israel.

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant [the conditional Mosaic covenant]*, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."*

Keeping the stipulations of the Law is how they carried it out the Mosaic covenant:

- **Function #1—A kingdom of priests:** Priests serve in a mediating fashion, as a go between two parties. Priests in the OT, like the Levitical priesthood, mediated between Yahweh and the people. In the New Covenant, we know that Christ is the ultimate priest and High Priest. He is our intercessor, and we can come to the Father directly through Him. Every believer is a "priest" as well, seeking to reconcile unbelievers with God by sharing the gospel. But you have to think also that the nation of Israel also served in a mediating/priestly function in the world. God mediates/displays the truth of Himself to the world through the vehicle or means of Israel who represented Him.

- **Function #2—A holy nation:** to be holy means to be set apart/distinct. If Israel kept the Law, they would have been a morally, ethically, and theologically *unique* people. They would be able *to maintain a strict geopolitical and ethnic identity.*[1] It set them apart from other nations. They would've stood out as a beacon of truth in the world. They would've been different. And if any nation ever lived by the Law, it's been said that it would be the most delightful and peaceable and noble nation that there has ever been.

Concept #1 – Israel was to be a godly <u>influence</u> on the wicked world.

What this tells us, again, is that in choosing Israel (Gen 12) God is not rejecting the world that has rejected Him (Gen 1-11); He is choosing the primary strategy to put Himself on display in the world and draw the world to Himself. They are to be salt and light in the midst of the ancient world and <u>this was accomplished in connection with the land</u>. How were they going to be a godly

influence on the world? Not by placing them in the middle of the Arabian desert, but at a strategic spot in Canaan-Israel. Their function and their location work in collaboration.

QUESTION #2: WHY DID GOD CHOOSE THE LAND OF ISRAEL? (Ezek. 5:5)

The answer is that the land of Canaan/Israel was at the heart of the ancient world, at the intersection of the three major continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe) in the only little green stretch of land there is. **Ezekiel 5:5** says, *"This is Jerusalem, I have placed her in the center of the nations, with countries round about her."* It's here that we're going to get into some geography which I think is just fun and fascinating, but you may think is as dull as dishwater. If you think it's dull as dishwater, I remind you that the geography of Israel is crucial because just think, **God revealed Himself in this geographical location through real historical events**. **Therefore, understanding the geography of Israel helps you understand events in the Bible which helps you understand God.** The Bible is a record of real events with real people interacting with God in real places.

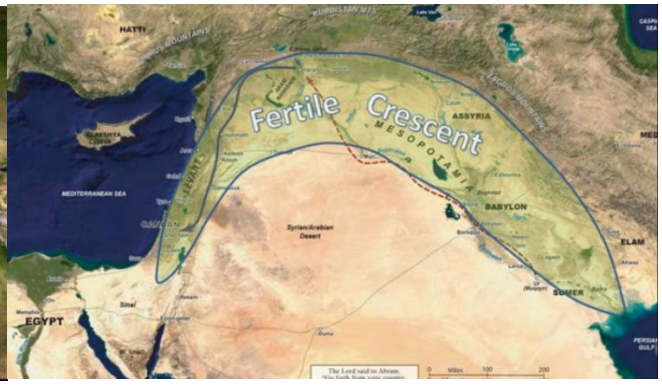
Look, when David says in **Psalm 9:11**, *"Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion* [i.e., Jerusalem]*; Declare among the peoples His deeds,"* he was speaking literally. God was their King. He was the Living God who, unlike the wooden idols, actually did things for them. People heard about this living God. We don't think about this a lot, but they could visibly see His shekinah glory presence right there in the tabernacle and temple. His glory was there from the Exodus in **1446 BC to 592 BC** when because of their persistent disobedience to the Law, the glory of God departed the temple (Ezekiel 8-11), thus bringing an end to theocratic kingdom of Israel. When the glory cloud departed, it marked the end of the theocratic kingdom of Israel.[2] It's a terrible moment, one that many are unmindful of today. Since then, Israel has been under the dominion of Gentiles, dubbed "the times of the Gentiles" (since 606 BC). As the apostles indicated in Acts 1:6, they are still looking for that kingdom to be restored to Israel as the prophets predicted, and as Peter preached, that it hinges upon their national repentance—their accepting Christ as Messiah (Acts 3:17-21). And God is going to use the terrible kindness of the Tribulation period to bring that about.[3] As one man said, the kingdom is linked with Israel's acceptance of the Messiah.[4]

So we need to note that the land of Israel has incredible significance for understanding the Bible. **It is, if you will, the center stage upon which He displayed Himself. The more you understand the land of Israel, the more you will understand your Bible** (the more you will also likely interpret it correctly which is historically-grammatically). But listen to what one man said, "A basic knowledge of the physical and climactic features of the land is necessary for a proper intellectual understanding of the Bible's narrative…. Geography-by providing a rich and decorative backdrop for the dramatic events of biblical history – heightens the sensory and emotional impact of the narrative" (J. Carl Laney). Another gentleman said, "The Biblical drama was acted out on the stage of geography. Just as stage props help to put one in the right mood for watching a play or promote understating of it or become an integral part of the presentation of the drama, a knowledge of biblical geography is essential to an appreciation of the biblical story." See, Christianity isn't like the rest of religions. It's not just a bunch of religious idea and concepts or

philosophical speculations. The substance of the Christian proclamation—like the Exodus or virgin birth or the resurrection for major examples—is the recital of God's historical acts.

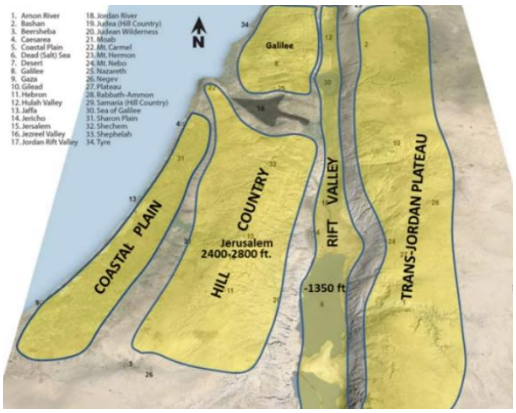
Zooming Out: The land of Israel is located on a **land bridge** at the heart of the ancient world on what is called the **fertile crescent**. The fertile crescent is this sickle-shaped, green shaded area in the picture from Egypt to Mesopotamia. It is land that could be **travelled, settled, and cultivated**, but is surrounded by land that can't. To the north and east are looming mountains; to the south is the unhospitable Arabian desert; and to the west is the Mediterranean Sea. So when people traveled, like Abraham did in Genesis 12 (from Ur to Haran to Canaan), they followed the fertile crescent that funnels people right through the land of Israel.





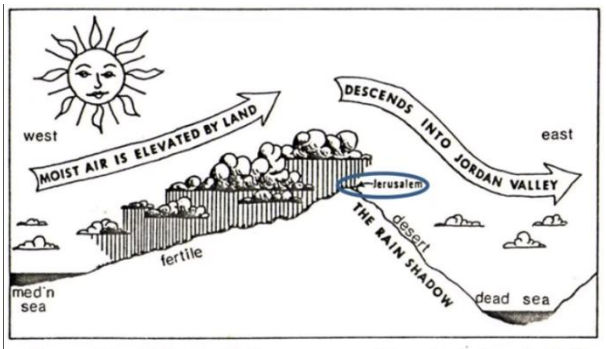
When kings went to war, they often travelled through Israel. Any kingdom or empire (like Egypt or Assyria or Babylon) who was interested in expanding military, economic or political interests would set their sights on Israel because if they could control that land, they could control the world. Because of that, this would be **the perfect place for God to demonstrate His transcendent sovereignty over the kingdoms of men**.[5] It was also **the perfect place to test the nation of Israel** as well. Would they obey God and trust Him to protect them? Or disobey and find insecurity? Would they lean on Yahweh, or lean on other nations like Egypt and their own military might to protect them? As long as Israel obeyed God, they didn't have to worry about other nations. He would make them the head and the nations would be the tail (Deut. 28:13). God would pull off, and verily He often did, miraculous victories. Israel wasn't to possess horses and chariots for war. They were to depend on God because the victory comes from Him (Deut. 17:16). Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but they were to trust in the name of the Lord their God (Ps. 20:7). However, if they disobeyed the Law, He would give them over (Deut. 28:25) and they would become the tail (Deut. 28:44).

Zooming in a little further: We see that even though the core of this land is only 150 miles long and 45 miles wide (Dan to Beersheba), about the size of New Jersey (the 5th smallest state), it is an extremely **diverse land** with distinctive geographical regions/zones. We tend to think of Israel as a desert, and some of it is, but most of it is not; it's farmland and forests and high plains.

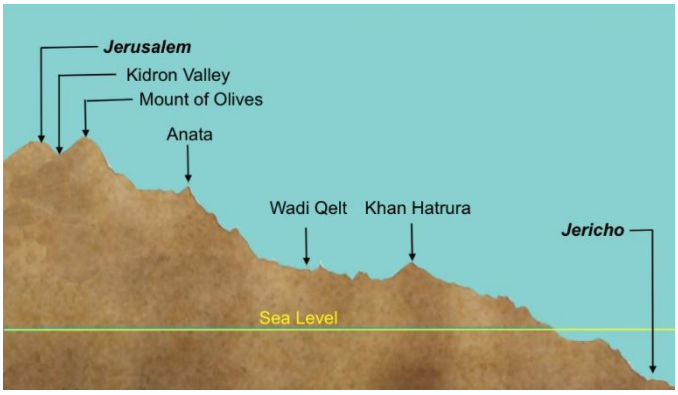


4 Major Geographical Zones:

1. **<u>Coastal Plain</u>** – This is a flat, agriculturally rich plain perfect for growing crops like barley or wheat. Before the Zionist movement, with Jews moving back to the land, those lowlands were malaria-ridden swamps. Jewish settlers in the 20th century legally bought the land from Arabs at exorbitant prices and made the land useful and beautiful again.[6] They also reforested it.
2. **<u>Hill Country</u>** – This is intense hill country that includes Galilee. These steep, V-shaped valleys that run east and west, force you to travel north and south on the ridge route or watershed route right in the middle of them, where Jerusalem is. Much of this region is forest or terraced. It's perfect for growing hillside crops like olives & grapes; in the gap between the hill country and the coastal plains is the **Shephelah**, foothills that protect/buffer Jerusalem on the west. We saw a picture of those in our worship lyric slides. The Shephelah is where Samson lived and battles between the Philistines and the Israelites took place like David & Goliath.
3. **<u>Jordan Rift Valley</u> –** a relatively flat valley following the Jordan river from Dan in the north near Mt. Hermon to the Dead Sea in the south. It makes for easy travel north and south but is a steep climb in and out of. The **Judean wilderness** is between the Hill Country and Rift Valley. It's the home of places like Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.
4. **<u>Trans Jordan Plateau</u>–** these are desert highlands can reach 3,000 feet in elevation. Mt. Nebo, where Moses viewed the Promised Land is located here straight across from Jerusalem.

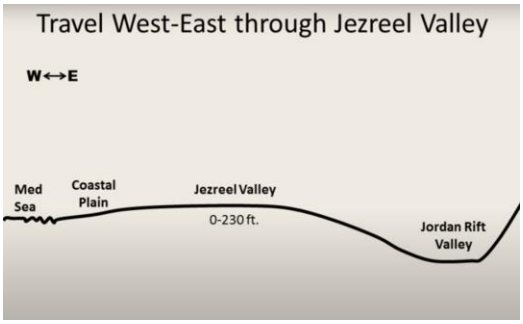


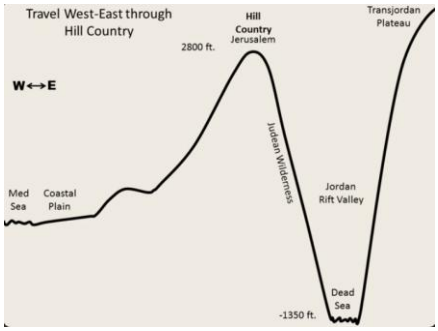
The prevailing wind in Israel is from west to east. The moist air above the Mediterranean Sea is pushed upward by the mountains, and rain results. When the air descends into the Jordan Valley, rain is prohibited and a "rain shadow" results.



So it's a very diverse land and "a good land," as the Bible says (Deut. 8:7). It has a little bit of everything in it. The sharp the elevation partially explains why this land is so diverse. This is interesting: the distance from the temple mount in Jerusalem to Tel-Jericho is only 13.8 miles as a crow flies, but the difference in elevation is 3500 feet. Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level and

Jericho 850 feet below sea level (which is why most-east-west traffic takes place through the Jezreel Valley in the north). Jerusalem might receive 24+ inches of rain per year (as much as London) and Jericho will only get 4" in rainfall. Jerusalem catches the moisture off the sea but rain is hindered in the Jordan Valley.

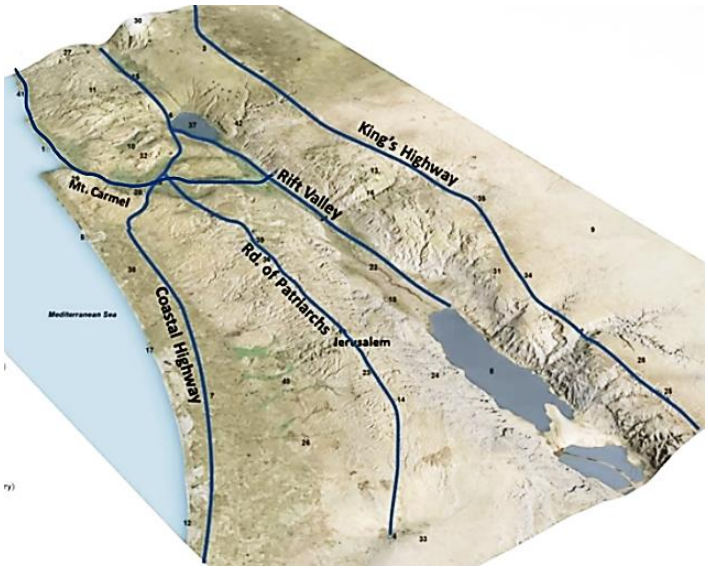




But just like kings' warring over Israel, the **land was designed to test Israel**. Most kingdoms were built in places where there's a steady supply of water; a river of some kind. Israel isn't like that. It's a place that is **dependent upon rain from heaven** (Deut. 11:11). Because of the soil type and sharp elevation with **rapid runoff into the wadis/ravines**, they are **dependent upon timely rains**, known as the early and latter rains. The **early/former rains**, which come in Oct/Nov, watered their grain crops like barley and wheat and hay (crops <u>needed to live</u>). The **latter rains** in Mar/Apr watered their hillside crops like grapes and olives that were used in medicine, wine, cosmetics, lamp oil for light, etc. (crops <u>needed to enjoy life</u>).

In **Deuteronomy 28:12** the Lord said that if they kept the Law, He would open His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to the land in its season and bless all the work of their hands. However, if they didn't, verse 23 says heaven will be bronze to them, and the earth, iron-experiencing powder and dust. **Jeremiah 5:24-25** says, "They do not say in their heart, "Let us now fear the LORD our God, who gives rain, both the former and the latter, in its season. He reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest." Your iniquities have turned these things away, and your sins have withheld good from you." So God so framed the climate of the land to be a faith lesson (Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23). The climate was like a leash around their neck and God gave it a good jerk if they didn't honor Him. They hung their life by faith upon God's goodness year in and year out. The diversity of the land would also test the unity among the tribes.

4 Major Routes: (from west to east)



1. **Coastal Highway / Via Maris** ("way of the sea") (Ex. 13:17; Is. 9:1; Mt. 4:15)– the great international route; traffic coming from Egypt and heading north would likely take this route because they're just like us—they want to take flattest, easiest route. The caravans and messengers (the semitrucks and news reporters of the ancient world) would follow the Coastal Plain until they were hindered by **Mount Carmel** and were forced into the **Jezreel Valley**/Valley of Megiddo. If you were a king, you wanted control of that valley to control the international traffic. Many battles have been fought there and as the Bible predicts it will also play an important role in the end times.
2. **Ridge Route** – This is the main internal route that follows the hill country watershed; it's also called **the road of the patriarchs** because Abraham, Jacob, and Jospeh frequently used it. Abraham and Lot were standing near this ridge surveying the land when choosing where to go.
3. **Rift Route** – makes for convenient travel between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Instead of taking the ridge route to get to Galilee, passing through Samaria, Jews in Jesus' day would take the rift valley to go around Samaria, creating a lot of work for them.
4. **The King's Highway** (Num. 20:17; 21:22)– the second major international route, running north and south on the Trans-Jordanian Plateau. It's a difficult desert route with robbers.



One thing worth noting is the location of **Jerusalem** in connection with the routes and the regions. Although it does have a spring and another spring nearby, it's not located on a river like most ancient capitals. It's in the hill country that's hard to access and war against, which is why it took the Israelites so long time to capture it from the Jebusites. But it's a great location because though military and commercial traffic was constantly marching through Israel on both sides, Jerusalem's worship center could enjoy remarkable peace and protection. As one of my professors says, it's like sitting on the median of an international freeway. In the wise providence of God, they influence everyone while maintaining seclusion. But after studying the geography briefly like this, it becomes apparent that God knew what He was doing when He chose this land.

Concept #1 – Israel was to be a <u>godly</u> influence on the wicked world.
Concept #2 – This influence was possible due to God placing Israel in the most <u>strategic</u> spot on the international highway of the ancient world.

My professor, Dr. Doug Bookman, said that one might say, "God prepared the Promised Land for His chosen people with the same degree of care that He prepared His chosen people for the Promised Land." They *Moody Atlas* says, "God prepared a certain kind of land positioned at a particular spot, designed to elicit a specific and appropriate response" (p. xv). It's the perfect place for God reveal Himself through His interactions with the Israelites—especially His righteous and covenant-keeping character. How amazing to think that God providentially shaped the face of the earth so that His truth and Person would be known and heard from the center of the world. And this place is still at the center of the world. It's no accident that whenever something happens in Israel, it's in the headlines. Everybody senses the importance of it, even today. The whole world has their eyes on Israel at all times, including God (Deut. 11:12). God is not done acting on the stage of Israel. It's the place where He will carry out end times events and even dwell again.

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 says, *"See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"*

If Israel kept the Law, they would be a powerful testimony to the nations. People would see how wise and righteous and good their God is. If they didn't, however—here's the thing you don't want to miss—they would still be a powerful testimony to the nations, but in a different way. **Ezekiel 5:5** says, *"This is Jerusalem, I have placed her in the center of the nations, with countries round about her"* but **Ezekiel 5:8** says, *'I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations."* Everybody would know whether they kept God's Law or not. They would see Him in all of His covenant keeping character whether it's through His blessing or cursing of them. Dr. Mark Saucy writes, "Even in her apostasy Israel will make God's name great to the nations."[7] God gets the glory either way, in cursing or blessing.

This information goes a long way in understanding whose land it is. The *land* and the *people* in the purposes of God are inextricably *linked*. The relationship of the *people* of Israel with the *land* of Israel demonstrates to the world the transcendent sovereignty of God.[8] Even today I think we see that. We see the results of their rejection of the Messiah and exile from the land for centuries, but we also see God's covenant keeping character in that many are in the land today with a geopolitical identity. To be dispersed among the nations and then to return like that? That's unheard of. Only God's covenant character and sovereignty explains the immortality of the Jewish people.

By way of personal application, let's go home with the thought that just like Israel, He desires for us to His representatives and mediating "priests" in this world as well, having a salt and light influence on this world—preserving and illuminating it. He wants us to be in the world, interacting with the world, but not like it. I can't help but think that right now we can do that by showing our

support and love for the Jewish people even when much of the world is turning against them. I know they're not perfect; I know they have their flaws. But even the apostle Paul—who took more heat from the Jews than anybody about the gospel—understood the Jews, though hardened *enemies of the gospel*, were also *beloved for the sake of their fathers* and their hardening was partial and temporary (Rom. 11). His heart for the Jewish people was so great that he was willing to give up his own salvation for them if he could (Rom. 9:1-5) and part of his motive behind his ministry to the Gentiles was to spur the Jews to jealousy so that they might see what Jesus can do for them (Rom. 11:13-14).

---

[1] Peter Goeman, "Understanding the Function of Old Testament Law in the Story of the Bible," *The Bible Sojourner* Podcast.

[2] For more info on the termination of the theocracy see Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 194-196; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 120-127.

[3] Douglas D. Bookman, "A Whale and An Elephant," in *Forsaking Israel* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2021).

[4] Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 17, writes, "God has determined that His kingdom is linked with Israel's acceptance of the Messiah. Passages such as Leviticus 26:40-45; Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44; [Romans 11:12, 15] and Acts 3:19-21 show this to be the case." He also writes on 414, "The national sin of rejecting the Messiah must be reversed by national repentance (see Lev 26:40–45)."

[5] Bill Schlegel, "01 Introduction. The Land of the Bible: Location and Land Bridge," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzzqeBx937I

[6] Michael Rydelnik, *Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004, 2007), 82.

[7] Mark L. Saucy, "Israel as a Necessary Theme in Biblical Theology," in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014), 174.

[8] Bill Schlegel, *Satellite Bible Atlas*, 20.

FALL 2023
Life Group Questions

Series: Israel or Palestine? // November 12, 2023
Why this land? // Selected Scriptures

Introduction

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. However, due to your leader's preference or the natural flow of discussion in your group, it should not be expected to cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 10-15 min)*

A **new warm up question** just for fun: What are looking forward to in the next month?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion:

1. Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth.
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives unto the glory of God.
    c. For grace to hear and apply what God's Word is teaching you.
2. Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group or read together as each person takes a couple of verses.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

Question 1:
How acquainted are you with the land of Israel? Was today's sermon on the geography of Israel helpful to you? In what way?

Question 2:
Can you think of any historical events in Scripture that might be better understood by understanding the geography of Israel?

Question 3:
Pastor mentioned a couple of reasons, involving traffic and climate, that demonstrate why God chose this land. God placed them here to test their faith. Does God ever place us in situations to test our faith? How do we respond to those?

Question 4:
What part of the sermon was most relevant for you and how can you apply it to your life?

Question 5:
How does God's choosing of the land of Israel go hand in hand with the Law? How does this understanding undermine the Palestinian narrative that Jews were never in the land?

Prayer *(Suggested time: 10-15 min)*

A significant part of coming together and "connecting" in Christian fellowship is being open and honest with our lives. Praying with a group of people may be new or it may be familiar to you. While we encourage everyone to pray out loud, please do not feel obligated to do so.

Take a few moments to share any prayer requests. Consider praying about what God teaching you through His Word and the recent discussion that seems the most applicable. Consider what you notice about your own relationship with Jesus. Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?