

Justice in Crisis

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to the book of Romans and chapter 12.

As we mentioned earlier, this morning we are taking a break from our normal series through the NT book of Colossians to speak to an issue that we feel needs to be addressed, and that is the attack by Hamas against Israel which occurred just over a week ago on Saturday, October 7th. The pastors believe this is one of those unusual occasions that warrants us stopping our normal practice and speaking about how the Scriptures apply to what's happening in the world. So I want to spend some time talking about it, knowing that things are still happening even this morning in that part of the world. We will have to be brief, there's a lot of history behind these events, and the story changes quite a bit depending on who is telling it.

What happened?

So first, let me briefly talk about what happened in this recent attack.

This is where Israel is on a world map... (show picture)



This is a closer map of the area... (show picture)

You can see the areas in grey – those are Palestinian controlled areas. The larger one on the right side – that's the West Bank, because it's on the west bank of the Jordan River. And the one small, grey piece of land on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, that's the Gaza Strip. It has been governed by Hamas since 2006, though Israel has been in control of the borders and anything that goes in or out of the area. There are roughly two million people who live in the Gaza Strip.



And the recent attacks involved the areas of Israel immediately surrounding the Gaza Strip. (show picture)

These coordinated attacks by Hamas resulted in the deaths of over thirteen hundred people, thirty-three hundred more were injured, and more than 150 others were taken hostage.

The U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on CNN Sunday morning: “This is the worst attack on Israel since the Yom Kippur War in 1973 — 50 years ago. But there’s a big difference. That was a conventional war between countries, between armies. This, a massive terrorist attack on Israeli civilians — indiscriminate firing of rockets against civilians, thousands of rockets; men and women and children dragged across the border into Gaza, including a Holocaust survivor in a wheelchair; people gunned down in the streets, civilians. So, you can imagine the impact this is having on Israel, and it should be something that revolts the entire world.”

I recognize that some here this morning may not know a lot about it, others of you have likely followed the situation very closely as it has developed this past week. Some of you may have questions about how you should think about this whole thing or what God thinks about this.

So I recognize that I may be talking to someone this morning who is unaware of what has happened or some of the background that has contributed to this attack on Israel. If that’s you, then I hope that this time will be helpful for you and maybe even a gentle encouragement for you to be somewhat aware of what is happening in the world. Most of our social media and the information we consume has been tailored to give us what we want. And if you rarely have to grapple with things that are hard or uncomfortable in the larger world, then perhaps you should be pressed to ask if you don’t need to spend a bit more time, thinking about some of the more important things happening in the world.



Others of you, don't need that encouragement. It may be that you spend too much time consuming news and world events. You probably know who you are. But I think it's becoming increasingly the case that people, particularly younger people, are too consumed with things that don't matter and unaware of some things that do.

Another group of people that I may be addressing this morning are those who have seen or heard about what has happened and you are confused. You have questions. Why would this happen? Who would do something like this? What should the response be – for Israel, for the United States? Would retaliation for an attack like this be justified? Or you may have questions about the role of Israel and biblical prophecy. Is there any connection between these events and God's plan for Israel?

There are likely some here who are grieving and even scared about the horrors that have taken place. Extreme violence against civilians, women and children and the elderly. And you may find yourself horrified and fearful or angry and enraged at those who would do these things. Why would God allow these things to happen? Wherever you find yourself, I pray that this time will be helpful as we address some of the questions that you may have.

I want to direct our attention to a portion of God's Word in the book of Romans. Paul wrote this letter to the believers in Rome, ruled by a pagan emperor who was not friendly to Christians. And in the original letter, there were no chapter breaks between chapters like we see in our English Bibles today. So I want to read from the end of chapter twelve into chapter thirteen because I believe Paul intended for them to be understood as part of the same line of instruction for his readers.

Romans 12:14 – 13:4

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. **15** Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. **16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. **17** Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. **18** If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." **20** To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, **4** for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Let's pray...

Intro

The concept of justice plays a prominent role In the Bible. God is just, and He upholds justice. That means that God always does what is right and works to set things right.

In the beginning, everything was good and right. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God and were at harmony with God, with the created world, and with each other. But because of their sin and rebellion against God, mankind is fallen. And there is now strife and disharmony in all of those relationships – between mankind and God, between, mankind and the created world, and between individual people.

The most important relationship that was broken is the vertical one between every human heart and our Creator. We are all now born in sin, both through the sin of Adam and through our own choices. We have rebelled against the good Law of God. And so we rightly deserve God's judgment. All people do. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And because God is just, He must punish sin and wickedness and set things right. And we rightly deserve that.

But God is also full of mercy and grace. So He sent His Son Jesus to bear the punishment for sins that we deserve. And God poured out His righteous anger on Jesus in our place on the Cross, so that God would be both just in punishing sin and the justifier – the one who has declared us to be righteous in Christ. Jesus rose from the grave and now commands all people everywhere to repent and turn to Him in faith for the forgiveness of their sins. And now, by the sheer mercy and grace of God, all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

That is the heart of the gospel message, and it's the most important thing I will say today. We must all remember and live our lives in light of this good news – that God's justice demands that my sins be judged. I deserve death and Hell. But God, because of His great mercy, He has saved me from my sin and given me eternal life, so that I can now be at peace with Him. God is just and has made it possible for me, a sinner, to be reconciled to Him.

But the gospel goes further than that – it gives hope that mankind can be reconciled to one another. The very next story in the Bible after the fall of Adam and Eve is that of Cain and Abel, in which Cain kills his brother Abel. And there has been strife and disharmony among people ever since. That is the reason that there are wars and violence and abuse and bloodshed throughout history, continuing today, and on into the future until Jesus returns and finally does away with sin and death once and for all.

But until that time, we live in a fallen world which is violent and cruel and in which injustice happens all around us. The Bible isn't shy about this...

The Preacher writes in **Ecclesiastes 3:8**

There is...A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

One day, God will do away with war, but until that day we need to understand how we are to think about war and violence in our world. And that's what I want to do with our remaining time. I want to talk about how we can process these events together. How do we make sense of what happened? Is Israel justified in retaliation? Is there a connection between these events and biblical prophecy? And then finally, how should we respond?

How should we think about these events?

First, I want to speak a word to those who saw or read some of the horrific stories of violence that occurred during this attack. I won't go into detail now, but if you are totally unaware of what happened, I think it would be good for you to gain at least some familiarity with what happened.

Hamas targeted innocent civilians, some at a music festival, many just going about their every day lives. This attack was the most deadly mass killing of Jewish people in a single day since the Holocaust of World War II.

I want to say clearly – what Hamas did to Israeli citizens was wicked and evil. Hamas is rightly labeled a terrorist organization. Their actions prove that they have evil purposes and wicked methods. It is good and right to plead with God that the Hamas would be quickly and decisively defeated, that their wicked actions would be stopped, and that their evil plans would be thwarted. The Palestinian people will never be led toward justice and peace by a terrorist group who is determined to eliminate the Jewish people.

Our God is a God of justice, and Christians should condemn these wicked and evil attacks against innocent people. God stands against such monstrous acts of terror.

God's people ought to lament the violence. We should cry out for God to put an end to this wickedness. We should weep with those who weep. We should long for the day when Jesus comes against to make things right.

Is Israel justified in retaliation against Hamas?

The condemnation of Hamas brings with it other questions about retaliation and the right of a country to defend itself against terrorism. Is Israel justified in retaliation against Hamas?

In order to speak to this question, we need to familiarize ourselves with some of the thinking that has been done by Christian theologians in the past. There is a long-standing position held by many Christians called the Just War Theory or the position that there are wars that are just and even good for governments and nations to engage in. The other position is that of Pacifism, which teaches that there is no such thing as a just war and that all Christians ought to abstain from participating in war of any kind.

Sometimes passages like Romans 12 are used to defend Pacifism or that kind of non-violent response. We read it earlier, God's people are not to repay evil for evil.

Romans 12:19

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

It sounds like people are not to retaliate. And that's true. But there are different responsibilities and duties given to individuals and to governments. That's why we have to keep reading into Romans 13 (again, an unfortunate chapter break). There we read,

Romans 13:1-4

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, **4** for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Individuals are not to take vengeance but leave room for the wrath of God. And how does God execute His wrath? At times, it is by using human governments. Verse four says that governments are God's servants. They have been established by God. And as God's servants, they do not bear the sword in vain. In other words, God has delegated the authority of the sword – the authority to wage war and punish evil – to human governments. It is the governing authorities who carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. The Old Testament is full of God using wicked nations to carry out his wrath on other nations – using Assyria to judge Israel and then Babylon to judge Assyria, etc. God will carry out his purpose regardless of whom He uses along the way.

So we need to recognize that the nation of Israel has the authority from God to defend itself against attackers, just as the United States does, and just as Rome did in Paul's day.

How, then, do governments know when they are justified in going to war? And how should war be conducted? This is where Just War Theory has classically presented eight principles – four of them speak to when it is morally permissible to engage in war. And four speak to how a nation ought to conduct warfare in the most just way.

These have been developed by Christian theologians like **Augustine**, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin. They may not be perfect, but I think they are generally helpful summaries of the application of biblical principles to warfare. You don't need to remember these, but know that others have put some deep thought into how the Bible addresses complicated issues like this.

All of the principles must be followed for a war to be waged with justice. I have taken some of the wording and descriptions for these from a couple textbooks on Christian Ethics by Scott Rae and Wayne Grudem.¹ The principles are:

1) Just war must be prompted by a just cause.

Wars are just if they are fought in self-defense. It is **not** morally permissible for a nation to wage war to expand its territory or unleash an unprovoked attack on a people.

2) Just war has a just intention or just goal.

The goal must be to secure a fair peace for all parties. A war cannot have as its goal to annihilate a people or exploit resources in an area. Further, the goal must have a reasonable probability of success. Is it possible to win or is the loss of life in vain?

3) Just war must be a last resort.

Diplomatic efforts must be earnestly pursued before violence is used. Diplomatic efforts should continue even after a war has begun to minimize the damage of war.

4) Just war is properly declared by rightful authorities.

Warfare is only rightly conducted by governments, not individuals, vigilante groups, or paramilitary groups operating outside legitimate government authority. Wars are only just if openly declared by the proper governing authorities.

Then there are four principles which regulate how warfare is to be conducted:

5) Just war must have limited objectives

The goal must not be total annihilation or wholesale destruction of a nation or people group. The purpose is a sustainable peace on the other side of the war – not to humiliate and permanently eradicate another nation.

¹ Scott Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 4th edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academics, 2018) and Wayne Grudem *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

6) Just war must use proportionate means

Only sufficient force to repel and deter the attacker should be used. Again, if the goal is a sustainable peace, then things like total warfare against a population or nuclear weapons may be morally problematic.

7) Just war avoids evil means

Even in war, there are rules that govern the conduct of the military and what tactics ought to be used. This means things like: captured enemies must be treated with justice, chemical and biological weapons are off-limits and practices like torture must be avoided.

8) Just war does not target noncombatants

Only those who are representing their country in the military can be targets in the course of war. Civilians, wounded soldiers, and prisoners of war ought not be the target of attacks.

So these are the eight principles of just war theory. Some have rightly pointed out that Just War Theory needs to be updated to address the ways that warfare has changed in the modern world. How do you, for example, work towards a sustainable peace when your enemy seeks to totally annihilate you out of existence? How do you avoid targeting noncombatants if your enemy uses human shields to protect their military?

These are hard questions and ones that do not have, in my opinion, easy answers. But nonetheless, I believe that these principles can be helpful in looking at even complicated situations like the one in Israel right now.

I believe Israel has the right, and even a duty to defend its people against the unjust and wicked attacks of Hamas. If Israel failed to defend her citizens, that would be an unloving act of cowardice. They have a responsibility to ensure that their citizens can live at peace. So I believe they can engage in just warfare, but in doing so must seek to minimize the casualties of noncombatants. Israel must not intentionally target civilians like women and children, even knowing that their own women and children were targeted by Hamas.

War is messy and awful. And I mean that as seriously as I can say it.

The theologian Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary wrote in the 19th century:

It is conceded that war is one of the most dreadful evils that can be inflicted on a people; that it involves the destruction of property and life; that it demoralizes both the victors and the vanquished; that it visits thousands of non-combatants with all the miseries of poverty, widowhood, and orphanage; and that it tends to arrest the progress of society in everything that is good and desirable...it is also conceded that the vast majority of wars which have desolated the world have been unjustifiable in the sight of God and man. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that war in all cases is to be condemned.²

No one escapes from war unscathed. All war is terrible, but sometimes the cost of avoiding war is greater than the cost of engaging in it when needed.

Does this relate to future prophecies concerning Israel?

Another question that may come to mind when thinking about this conflict with Israel is how this may or may not connect to prophecies about Israel in the Bible.

Historically, there are a few different perspectives on how the prophecies about Israel are to be understood. Some argue that the church has totally replaced Israel, such that there are no more prophecies that remain to be fulfilled for the Jewish people. Others see the distinctions between Israel and the church to be more absolute, some even saying that there timelines and dates that can be set according to the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948.

I think both of those more extreme positions do not match what the Bible teaches. I think God still has a purpose for the people of Israel. They are God's chosen people. Paul lists of what sets them apart in

Romans 9:4

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. **5** To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

² Charles Hodge *Systematic Theology* 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eardmans, 1871-1873; 1970), 3:365.

At this time in the history of redemption, God has allowed a partial hardening to come over the Jewish people in their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. This is a rejection that continues in the political nation of Israel today. But one day, I believe God will bring about a revival among the Jewish people such that all Israel will be saved as Paul says in Romans 11:26.

So while I do not think that we should see these events in Israel as starting timelines on prophetic events, I do think there is something significant happening as God preserves the Jewish people in the land of that was promised to Abraham centuries ago.

So is this attack by Hamas part of the end times? My answer is maybe. We know that there will be wars and rumors of wars until the very end. But God is sovereign over all of history, and He is working out His plan exactly as He intends. As Psalm 2 says, He who sits in the heavens laughs. God rules over all of history and no earthly kingdom or terrorist group is able to thwart God's eternal plan.

How should we respond?

One of the last questions that I want to address before we spend some time praying is this – how should we respond? Let me suggest three things.

1) Lament

God knows that the world is broken and that injustice happens and that we will see and experience many trials and tribulations in this life. And the Bible has a category for crying out to God with this pain. God does not expect that we simply grit our teeth and bear it when we are faced with great evil. God knows the wickedness of the human heart. He knows the wickedness of my own heart. And so there is a place for lament in the Christian life. To lament is to cry out to God with our questions and our pain and our hurt. It is a cry that is honest and raw. But it is also a cry of faith – calling out to the only one who can truly do something about all the evil in the world.

So we rightly grieve. And we lament. And we say, “How long, O Lord? How long will you allow this wickedness to happen?” And we say, “Lord have mercy!”

So when we see news reports or hear of wickedness being perpetrated against innocent people, we go to God in lament. For He hears us and He sees.

2) Hope in God

First we lament, second we put our hope in God. We do not put our hope in human governments to get it all sorted out. We do not put our hope in weapons or military might. We put our hope in God who alone can change the human heart.

When we see and consider the great evil of groups like Hamas and the wickedness of their ideology, we should be warned about the great evil that also lies in every human heart in rebellion against God. But by the grace of God, I deserve the righteous wrath of a just and holy God.

We should say, God deliver us from hate and the desire for personal vengeance and violent murderous thoughts. Jesus said that to hate your brother makes us deserving of God's judgment. The only hope for the Jewish Israeli's and the Palestinians is to put their trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

There are Christians in this part of the world. There are churches there preaching the gospel to the Jews and Palestinians who live there. They have the message of hope that is more powerful than any peace accords or treaty that could be signed. The gospel gives hope and the promise that Jesus is able to make all things right.

3) Pray

A final response is to pray. We should pray for the quick defeat of Hamas and all who would terrorize the innocent. We should pray for protection of civilians. We should pray for the Christians and churches in that part of the world to be faithful and bold as they love their Jewish and Palestinian neighbors.

We should pray for a sustainable peace for Jerusalem, knowing that such a prayer is asking God to return again for His people, to judge His enemies, and set all things right again.

Psalms 122:6-9 says...

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they be secure who love you! Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!"

For my brothers and companions' sake I will say, "Peace be within you!"

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

So that's what we're going to do now. I'm going to invite a couple men up here to lead us in a time of prayer for Israel and this situation. Let's pray...