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JERUSALEM

Sermon Starters

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The gorgeous film JERUSALEM for IMAX® and Giant Screen theatres takes viewers inside the walls of the beloved city on the hill. It is a rich celebration of the roots of the City of David: both timeless and timely. The film links ancient history to current religious rites and practices. It awakens a desire in viewers to visit the city and learn more about it. Pastors and audiences may find themselves overwhelmed by over seven hundred references in the Bible to Jerusalem. Many churches trace the events of Holy Week and Jesus' passion across the streets of Jerusalem. Yet, so much additional rich, biblical history occurred in and around the City of David.

In considering Jerusalem across the scriptures, what themes emerge for possible sermons or Bible studies? These six sermon starters are designed to spark the imagination of church leaders across denominations. They are a starting word rather than a final word; suggestions prompted by a compelling, contemporary film. Jerusalem has been a place of sacrifice, the place of worship, an object of misplaced faith, a source of mourning, a symbol of restoration, and a future hope. Jerusalem remains an inspiration throughout our seasons of faith.

THEME: SACRIFICE
SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 22

What are our most precious possessions? Would we be willing to let them go if God asked? God's call upon Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 tests their faith. How far are they willing to go in obedience to God? Abraham ascends Mount Moriah, potentially dreading every step. Imagine the pain and confusion that races across father and son as Abraham binds Isaac. How could he place his only son, the one he prayed and waited for into such a precarious position. Yet, Abraham raised the knife until an angel intervened.

Abraham sees a ram nearby, suitable for sacrifice. His faith has been rewarded. In this godly provision, we see a precursor to Jesus and his sacrificial work on the cross. To honor his obedience, God promises to bless Abraham with descendants as numerous as the stars or the sand. Through him, all nations on earth will be blessed. This galvanizing incident on Mount Moriah also becomes the hill in Jerusalem where David eventually founds the temple. Our faith is rooted in a place connected to a willingness to sacrifice.

THEME: WORSHIP**SCRIPTURE: PSALM 122**

What should our praise and worship look and sound like? How do we honor God? The Temple in Jerusalem has always been associated with an uphill journey; ascension as essential for getting closer to God. As a young boy, Jesus and his parents went up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover (Luke 2:41). Pilgrimage was a key aspect of worship. It involved movement. So, how did Jerusalem become the City of David, the locus of religious devotion? In 2 Samuel 24, David rebuilds the altar that Abraham erected on Mount Moriah. In I Kings 15, Jerusalem is identified as God's city, the city of David. Yet, David's personal indiscretions keep him from fulfilling his hopes of building a temple.

In 2 Chronicles 3, David's son Solomon builds the temple to God's specifications. The temple becomes the gathering place, the pilgrimage site where the faithful return for religious festivals. The Psalms of Ascent (numbers 120-134) celebrate Jerusalem as a city on a hill, a beacon of light for all the nations. It is easy to imagine pilgrims reciting these short, affirming songs on their march toward the temple. In Psalm 122, the tribes of the Lord go up to praise the name of the Lord. They (and we) are called to pray for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem. The welfare of the city is connected to the proper worship of the people.

THEME: MISPLACED FAITH**SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 7**

It is easy to get a bit too comfortable, to misplace our faith in our home, our church, or our accomplishments. Jerusalem is described as a crown of glory—the city on the hill in Isaiah 62. With Jerusalem's exalted position came an equal amount of responsibility. Israel was blessed to be a blessing. Indifference can often accompany success. Despite the warnings by prophets across the centuries, the kings of Israel did not always practice justice and reign in righteousness. Jeremiah stands at the entrance to the temple decrying false idols and empty religion (Jeremiah 7). While the people placed their confidence in the temple of the Lord, their actions did not always reflect God's calling to welcome the stranger or care for the widows and orphans.

The most catastrophic event in the Hebrew Bible is the destruction of Jerusalem. In 2 Kings 25:1-17, 2 Chronicles 36, and Jeremiah 52, the army of Babylon led by King Nebuchadnezzar devastates the city of David and its people. The temple, the palace, and all the houses of Israel are burned down. The walls of Jerusalem, the strong citadels, are breached and broken. The Israelites are marched towards exile in Babylon in a state of shock. They wondered, "How could God allow their beloved temple and sacred city to be destroyed?" They slowly woke up to the painful realization that they had misplaced their faith in the temple rather than in God.

THEME: WEeping AND MOURNING**SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 23**

Following God does not mean we are immune from grief. Shedding tears is also part of the religious journey. We have seen photos of the faithful praying at the Wailing Wall. Such mournful feelings have always been part of Jerusalem. By the waters of Babylon, Judah wept when they remembered their beloved by now distant, Zion (Psalm 137). In the biblical book of Lamentations, Jerusalem comes to grips with the grim reality. They cry out for comfort but it doesn't arise. Deliverance does not come. They realize how costly their rebellion has been.

We see this painful history played out again when Jesus wept over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37. He acknowledges how the people ignored the words of the prophets across. He longs to comfort God's people, to gather them under his protective feathers like a mother hen. Jesus longs to bring us close, to shield us from harm yet it tough to gather a stubborn brood. Much of our weeping and mourning arises from our own stubborn resistance. How might we come to rest under the protective embrace of Jesus, a gracious mother hen?

THEME: RESTORATION**SCRIPTURE: NEHEMIAH 2-3**

We have all experience feelings of brokenness. It could be physical or spiritual challenges. How do we rebuild and repair aspects of our lives that fall to pieces?

In the book of Ezra, the enlightened King Cyrus of Persia allows the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. He returns the holy items seized by Nebuchadnezzar years before. The process of rebuilding God's house takes time (Ezra 5) involving multiple rulers and generations. It is aided by public confession and repentance (Ezra 10). But it is far more than words. There must be meaningful actions to accompany the proclamations. Is there a genuine design for purity, demonstrated in repentance and renunciation of earlier transgression. It is easier to rebuild when we are all on the same page, humbly committed to God's calling. After a long exile, the Hebrews celebrate the restoration of the temple.

But what about the city wall surrounding Jerusalem? Nehemiah leads the restoration of the community. His careful surveying of the city (in Nehemiah 2) demonstrates the importance of assessment, getting a full picture of the scope of the damage before we embark on a rebuilding plan. Nehemiah 3 illustrates the power of community. Restoration is never a solo project. It requires a great cloud of witnesses to pull off. Seeking the welfare of the city, investing in the common good, proves worthwhile. In Nehemiah 12, Jerusalem is rededicated to God's glory. Choirs and trumpets are appropriate for public ceremonies. Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate the power of long-range projects. Rebuilding takes planning and time, but the results are worth celebrating even centuries later.

THEME: A GLORIOUS FUTURE**SCRIPTURE: REVELATION 21**

The collision of cultures created by the Internet has made us a bit edgy. We come into contact with people who may not share our languages, or beliefs. Yet, it also provides unparalleled opportunity to revel in diversity and celebrate the breadth of God’s creation.

Jerusalem has always been a crossroads of the world where cultures collide. On the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, a broad cross section of tribes coalesced in the City of David. The nascent Christian movement had yet to take shape. But as Peter outlines the dramatic events surrounding Jesus’ death and resurrection, a powerful wind blows across the assembly. The Holy Spirit cuts across cultural differences, allowing people to hear the message and praise God in their own language. What a foretaste of heaven, where every tribe and tongue will worship God.

Jerusalem has long been foreseen as the place where God’s glory would be fully revealed. People will stream towards the mountains of Zion where the word of the Lord will go out from Jerusalem (Micah 4). The prophet Micah describes a peaceful future when swords are beat into plowshares and nations will not take up sword against nation. God envisions a new heaven and a new earth, where Jerusalem will be a delight and joy in Isaiah 65:17-18. The Bible concludes with Jerusalem descending from heaven as a glorious city of God (Revelation 21). The walls will sparkle with precious stones, the gates will be made of pearl, and the streets will be paved with gold. There is no night in the new Jerusalem—because it will be lit all day, everyday, by the glory of God. No war, no tears in the new Jerusalem. We have a remarkable opportunity today to work toward the peaceable tomorrow.

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