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SIX LESSONS TO UNLOCKING THE TRUTH  
TO GOD'S HOLY LAND



International Fellowship  
of Christians and Jews® 

## A IS FOR “ALIJAH”

We’ve invested the last three weeks of our sermon series on the modern nation of Israel. This coming April 19<sup>th</sup> is the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rebirth of the nation of Israel. This event is not only important historically and politically, it is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and a demonstration of God’s faithfulness. Christians all over the world should celebrate with the people of Israel during this anniversary.

During our six-week series we have used the acrostic I.S.R.A.E.L. as our template.

Israel is ***Important***;

Israel is a ***State***;

Israel teaches us about ***Righteous giving***;

Israel teaches us about ***Aliyah***—the Hebrew word that means return;

As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we must become ***Educated*** (and educate others) about Israel;

Israel provides us for us an opportunity to ***Love*** our neighbours.

This week we focus on *Aliyah*, which is the Hebrew word that means “return”. This basic concept has deep meaning for the people of Israel not only because of their return to the modern state of Israel, but also because of their return from exile time and again in the story of the Scripture. The people of modern Israel see parallels between what happened in the sixth century BC (the great exile to Babylon), what has happened in 1948, *and* what continues to happen today.

*Aliyah* is a word filled with the message of the faithfulness of God and hope for the future. *Aliyah* is the only Hebrew word we are using in our acrostic, and few words are closer to the heart of the people of Israel than *Aliyah*. *Aliyah* has always been a part of the Jewish experience.

You might recall from week two of our series that we examined at great length a passage from Isaiah, chapter 49. The passage applies to Israel’s return from Babylonian exile, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the return of the Jews to the modern state of Israel after 1,800 years of wandering. In fact, it is impossible to talk about the modern state of Israel without talking about *Aliyah*. Today, let’s look at three passages from the Old Testament that illustrate the importance and meaning of *Aliyah*.

To understand the *sorrow* of exile, listen to Psalm 137: 1-7:

Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept  
as we thought of Jerusalem. We  
put away our harps,  
hanging them on the branches of poplar trees. For  
our captors demanded a song from us.  
Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn:  
“Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!” But  
how can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a pagan land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand forget how to play the harp. May  
my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth  
if I fail to remember you,  
if I don’t make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

This song represents the sorrow and the loss of the Jewish people while they were in exile in Babylon. Israel—both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom—had been defeated by first one world power and then another. Their Babylonian conquerors took away the best and the brightest of Israel’s young people (you can read about this in the Book of Daniel, chapters 1-6). Remembering Jerusalem caused the people of Israel to weep. Their songs of worship caused them to weep. Their Babylonian overlords taunted them with the memories of home, but home was a distant memory. They could not sing the Lord’s songs in a foreign land. The best they could hope to do was to keep the memory of Jerusalem in their hearts.

But world events eventually changed. Babylon was defeated and Israel’s new overlords allowed the exiles to return home. For some of them the exile had lasted 70 years. Some knew the prophesies from Jeremiah that predicted that the exiles would return. Others knew the words of Ezekiel (which we will examine in just a moment) that also promised a return. But even with the prophetic assurance they had received, returning again to Jerusalem was like a wild fantasy, a joy beyond all happiness. And then—it happened!

To understand the joy of return, let’s listen to Psalm 127: 1-6:

When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem,  
it was like a dream!  
We were filled with laughter,  
and we sang for joy. And  
the other nations said,  
“What amazing things the LORD has done for them.” Yes,  
the LORD has done amazing things for us!  
What joy!  
Restore our fortunes, LORD,  
as streams renew the desert.  
Those who plant in tears  
will harvest with shouts of joy. They  
weep as they go to plant their seed,  
but they sing as they return with the harvest.

This joy lasted for centuries. Psalm 127 is one of the 15 “Songs of Ascent” (Psalms 120-134). In the centuries after the return of the Babylonian exile, pilgrims to Jerusalem sang these psalms as they walked up Mount Zion on their way to Jerusalem. In fact, in the Hebrew language, the word *Aliyah* describes the act of “going up”. The idea of *Aliyah* is a joyful rising, a returning against all odds, a testimony to the goodness of God that is greater than world events or world leaders.

Perhaps you can understand these emotions. Have you ever had an experience that provided a joy you had never dared to hope for again? Perhaps the doctors had told you that you would never have children, but then you found yourself expecting a baby! Or you were told that a tumor you had was inoperable only to find out that God had healed you and that an operation was unnecessary. You didn’t dare hope that the situation would ever change, because to hope would involve so much emotional risk. And yet, God moved on your behalf!

Or, perhaps you find yourself in the opposite situation today: You have received bad news or you have been living with the bad news for years. Perhaps you have been praying for a prodigal child or grandchild for years, or maybe even decades. You dare not allow yourself to hope. No amount of positive attitude or wishful thinking can change the circumstances in which you might find yourself. But you continue to pray because we are urged to pray about everything—even the hopeless things. God can change the circumstances. The experience of the people of Israel and the testimony of scripture is that even when hope is lost, God remains faithful. God is present with us in our current distress. God is working behind the scenes to bring deliverance and joy.

The final Bible passage for today comes from Ezekiel, chapter 36:

*“For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:24-28).*

The prophet Ezekiel wrote down his prophecies while the people of Israel were in Babylon. His message was a message of hope to a people who had lost hope. They had lost family members in the armed conflict with Babylon, they had lost their homeland, and they had largely lost any hope of ever returning to Israel again. But Ezekiel’s message urged people to hope again in God, that they would return to the land God promised their forefathers and that they would dwell in the land of Israel again, free to worship God.

Christians, too, hold this passage from Ezekiel in high regard. Notice how the prophet connects the return to Israel with receiving a new heart and a new spirit? We receive a new heart and a new spirit when we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Just a few chapters earlier (chapter 31) Ezekiel used the phrase “new covenant.” Christians interpret such passages as the prediction of the coming of the Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, as well as the establishment of a new covenant between Israel, and indeed the entire world. This is the new covenant that is fulfilled in Jesus.

This is one reason the modern people of Israel are so filled with hope. They understand that even the poorest immigrant returning to the modern state of Israel is a resource for the future. Under the joyful hand of immigrants to modern Israel, the land of Israel is blossoming again. Where there had been desert there are now groves of trees and vegetation and the potential to support more people. Because of *Aliyah*, the very land of Israel is flourishing again. This, too, is a part of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Listen to the end of Ezekiel chapter 36:

*“And when I bring you back, people will say, ‘This former wasteland is now like the Garden of Eden! The abandoned and ruined cities now have strong walls and are filled with people!’ Then the surrounding nations that survive will know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruins and replanted the wasteland. For I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do what I say.*

*“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am ready to hear Israel’s prayers and to increase their numbers like a flock. They will be as numerous as the sacred flocks that fill Jerusalem’s streets at the time of her festivals. The ruined cities will be crowded with people once more, and everyone will know that I am the LORD” (Ezekiel 36:35-38).*

Can you see the modern application of Ezekiel’s prophecy? As the modern state of Israel blossoms again:

“The surrounding nations that survive will know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruins and replanted the wasteland.”  
In our lifetime we are seeing the effects of *Aliyah*!

“Returning” (*Aliyah*) has always been part of the Jewish experience. Abraham traveled to Egypt and returned to the Promised Land. So did Isaac. Before the patriarch Jacob died and was buried in Egypt, he asked the people of Israel to dig up his bones when they returned to the land of promise so he, too, could experience *Aliyah*. As an infant, Jesus was whisked away to Egypt by Joseph and Mary in order to protect him from the decree of King Herod that baby boys in Bethlehem under the age of two should be killed. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary stayed in Egypt until Herod had died and it was safe to come home. They *returned* to Israel.

For the people of Israel, returning home has been apart of their national identity. Sometimes the people of Israel where away from the land of promise for only a few years. Sometimes it was decades. Even the Lord Jesus experienced *Aliyah*.

You can imagine how emotional the return was for the Babylonian exiles after seven decades away from home. Now try to imagine the return from worldwide exile after 18 *centuries* of wandering! This is both the miracle and joy of *Aliyah*. God's people, the people of Israel, have returned to their homeland. And not only have they returned from every corner of the globe, they *continue* to return. The new nation of Israel is still receiving God's people into their country. Jews from all over the world have returned and continue to return to Israel. In 1948 the population of Israel was perhaps 600,000 people. Now, 70 years later, that number is 8.7 million, and the growth is largely because of immigration. Some might say that Israel is a nation of immigrants, but the truth is that Israel is a nation of *Aliyah*. Perhaps now you understand something of the scope and the wonder of *Aliyah* in the modern nation of Israel.

And still *Aliyah* continues. All around the world there are organizations and efforts to promote *Aliyah*. Organizations that provide airline tickets and help with immigration paperwork that allows the people of Israel to return to the nation of Israel.

This means that Christians can also participate in *Aliyah*. We should prayerfully consider how and where to support efforts to help with immigration to Israel. The new nation of Israel sees every returning Israelite as an asset, a resource that will continue to improve their new nation. Around the feasting table of Israel there has always been room for one more. And so it is today. For example, one such organization provides support and assistance to help with *Aliyah*. Their initiative is called *On Wings of Eagles* (a reference to the verses in Exodus 19:4, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”)

Here's how they describe their work:

With large-scale immigration finally possible, the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews of Canada* launched a new program, *On Wings of Eagles*, to transport these Jews on “freedom flights” to the Holy Land. To date, hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews have made *Aliyah* (immigrated to Israel) through this initiative.

For centuries, Jews dreamed they would one day return to their homeland of Israel. Today, this is taking place before our very eyes. By funding this “second exodus” of Jews from oppression to freedom, *The Fellowship's On Wings of Eagles* supporters are showing their compassion and concern for the Jewish people, and helping fulfill the biblical prophecies that promise the return to Israel of Jewish exiles from “the four corners of the earth.”

The return of Jewish people to their homeland in modern times has been going on for 70 years. According to Yael Eckstein, executive vice president of the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews of Canada*, “God always intended for His people to return to the land He promised to Abraham. Today, that's happening at a faster rate than ever before in Jewish history. Thanks to Israel and her international allies, many Jews' lifelong dream to return to their rightful homeland can be a reality.”