



The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society February 2024

Israel and Hamas: Is the Holy Land Cursed?

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

A friend was recently telling me that Joe Biden's approval numbers are at historic lows. As it is that I don't normally pay attention to such things, I asked "Why? What has he done recently that he wasn't doing already? What's changed?"

"It's his support of Israel. People see what Israel is doing to Hamas and feel that Biden is supporting a genocide." What stands out to

me in this conflict is how the news media, for the most, part fails to tell us just how one-sided this war has become. The current death toll from the Hamas attack on October 7 is at 1,139. By comparison, at least 24,448 people have been killed and 61,504 wounded in Israeli attacks on Gaza. This is why the Lord established the rule of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. The rule was created to curb violence, forcing people to not escalate the situation. If somebody takes out your eye, you can’t kill their whole family in return. It seems that modern Israel has forgotten this simple rule that their culture was founded on.



What comes to my mind though is the just the sheer volume of not only death, but fear, hatred, and evil that is being unleashed in this tiny part of the world. Maybe you know this already, but the Gaza

strip is only 41km long and 10km wide. Today it's home to 2.2 million people and is one of the most densely-populated areas in the world. But in Biblical times do you know who lived there? The Philistines. So this land has been involved in war for a long, long time, and I think that this dark history actually matters.

In fact, I think if we take a look through the Bible, we can make an interesting case that the land is cursed. When God is admonishing Adam for eating the forbidden fruit, He says, "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen 3:17). In the next chapter, after Cain murders Abel, God says to him, "When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you" (Gen 4:11). The ground is no longer friendly and easy to work. When the Israelites are about to enter into the Promised Land – I'll refrain from calling it the "Holy" Land for now – Moses tells them that not only they, but the land itself, will be cursed if they break the covenant:

All nations would say, 'Why has the Lord done so to this land? What does the heat of this great anger mean?' Then people would say: 'Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt; for they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods that they did not know and that He had not given to them. Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against this land, to bring on it every curse that is written in this book. And the Lord uprooted them from their land in anger, in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.' (Deuteronomy 29:24-28, emphasis mine)

Did the Israelites eventually break the covenant? Absolutely. It's true that things overall went well for about 450-500 years, from the crossing of the Jordan to the time of King Solomon's reign. However, it's Solomon who started to veer off course, and what followed was centuries of violence on the land. From civil wars to a slew of invaders – Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, among others – there was a lot of not just “normal violence”, but large-scale war in the Promised Land. As I've been reflecting on the Israel-Hamas war, I'm starting to wonder how real these “curses” are.

The Writings tell us that some places in this world do attract evil spirits and genii because the place corresponds to a particular hell.

It is to be known that falsities and evils of every kind correspond to unclean and loathsome things in the natural world, and the more direful falsities and evils to things pertaining to dead bodies and to fetid excrementitious things, and the milder falsities and evils to things pertaining to swamps; consequently the dwelling-places in the hells of those who are in such falsities and evils appear like pits and sepulchers; and if you will believe it, such evil genii and spirits also have their abode in the sepulchers, privies, and swamps that are in our world. (AE 659)

This passage is telling us that when we go to a place and pick up a bad vibe, or what my Mom called the “heebie-jeebies,” there's a good reason for it. It's not your imagination: evil is present in those places. But of particular interest to me is that while a swamp is a

naturally-occurring feature of the land, privies (aka outhouses) and sepulchers are things that we do to a place. We're the ones defecating there, or putting dead bodies there. We have made it possible for evil to be present there because of what we put there. Have we cursed that land?

The Writings are very clear that evil is contagious, and if we associate with evil people, it won't be long before we start to think nothing of their evil and embrace it for ourselves. So if evil people are contagious, does it make sense that cursed land is too? If we think about land where there's been a lot of war over thousands of years, is it a bridge too far to suggest that there would be more evil present there, and not only that, but that this extra hellish presence would be affecting those who live upon it?

Over the last couple of weeks I've been researching the world of exorcism. In the book "An Exorcist Tells His Story" the author states:

How can we fall prey to extraordinary satanic activity? By this I mean other than the ordinary activity – temptation – which applies to everyone. We can do so through our own fault, or by being completely unaware. We can group the reasons into four categories: 1) with God's permission, 2) as innocent victims of an evil spell, 3) due to a grave and hardened sinful condition and 4) through association with evil people or places.

How's that? That's right: we can fall prey to satanic activity through association with evil places. How do places become evil? He says it

can be as simple as practicing seances and witchcraft there. What if you're hating somebody or a nation so much that you start murdering people in a war? What kind of spirit do you think that brings in? What if that has been happening in the same place for centuries? Could that make a place evil?

Well, according to Divine Love & Wisdom, when our minds are responsive to evil, we invite hell to have direct contact with earth:

...The hells are not distant from us but are around us and even in us when we are evil. They are therefore in direct contact with earth. We are surrounded by angels of heaven or by spirits of hell in regard to our desires and consequent thoughts and as to the deeds that result from them both, deeds that are either good or evil functions. Since the same kinds of thing we have on earth exist in the heavens and the hells as well, it follows that the inflow from that source produces such things directly when conditions are right... The reason the hells are around and are therefore in direct contact with the earth is that the spiritual world is not in space, but is found wherever there is a responsive feeling. (DLW 343)

The key is that there has to be a “responsive feeling” or “corresponding affection”. I think it is fair to say that the minds of Hamas and Israel are providing a responsive feeling to those of hell, and are in fact creating hell on earth. Does this mean that the land is cursed? I tend to think so, though not in a witch-crafty type of way, but cursed through centuries of abuses carried out on it

which have made hell more present there. For some this may sound like a very non-scientific and irrational way of looking at things, but for me – and yes, I know, we all have free will – it helps me understand, and even have a little sympathy for, how it is that people are carrying out such atrocities in that land, yet again.

Rise Above It Spiritual Growth Group

How do we avoid getting bogged down in the unpleasant aspects of life? We rise above it. This program is based on looking at the deeper, personal meaning of the Ten Commandments. As we work through it, we find that plenty of people have provided their own personal testimony as to how this way of holding the Commandments has not just changed their mind, but actually changed how they were doing things. So while you may be able to recite the Ten Commandments, the hope is that this program will take those familiar truths, and your life, to a new level.

Rise Above It church services will start on Sunday, February 4th, and discussion groups will be happening every Thursday at 11am starting the 8th. We hope you can join us!

Roseville Retreat Recap

I'm pleased to say that the weekend was a successful one. I didn't count how many were in attendance, but I'd say it was around 20-25. What was impressive about it was that we had people from all over: from Canberra, Tamworth, and two from the US as well!

We had three speakers presenting: Howard, Ros Taylor and myself. Ros started the program off with a session titled, “Why Worry? We Were Told This Would Happen”. She started off by showing some of the discouraging numbers around declining church attendance and membership around the world, but followed it up with the teachings from the Word that basically say, “I told you this was going to happen”. To me, her main point was that the true new church isn’t about worshipping in buildings, but rather a rethink about how people approach spirituality. She cited examples of different ministries going on that are helping and teaching people, but are outside the traditional church structures. Overall this lecture was a good reminder that God has it all under control.

Howard was up next, and followed on nicely from Ros’. His session was “Uses of the Church”, which was to say that, despite declining numbers, the traditional church still has a useful role to play in the modern world. We looked at how it can be of use from an individual perspective, a local/community perspective and a larger perspective. He introduced each of these perspectives, then separated us out into small groups to discuss one of many provided discussion questions. What I heard coming out of this was that people felt like organized religion is in a really tough place right now: not only are there fewer people interested, but there’s greater competition for those who are. In the end we have to really examine what uses we can offer and provide, because without a focus to the use, how can we expect people to participate?

I was the next up, offering a presentation on “New Church Perspectives on Organ Transplants”. Perhaps you’ve heard some of

the stories... a middle age man has a heart transplant, the donor a teenage boy. Suddenly he has youthful energy again, and will sit silently and listen to loud music through headphones. Or a woman who says she was a lesbian, gets a heart transplant then says she's no longer interested in women and is engaged to marry a man. These were just a couple of stories where people have had profound changes due to a heart transplant. Science can't explain it, but the Writings do give us some potential ideas. When we look at the teachings around the Grand Man, we learn that there are communities of spirits that interact with each of our organs. Could it be that when we transplant an organ, we're actually transplanting a lot more than we realize?

Howard finished the day with a short presentation titled "The Gospel of Ted Lasso". If you're not familiar with Ted Lasso, he's a fictional American football coach who is hired to coach soccer for a UK Premier League team. This show ran for three seasons, and its basic idea is that Coach Lasso knows so little about soccer, but is such a wonderful human being that even his most ardent sceptics eventually come to love and respect him. Ultimately he serves as a great role model of how we should be implementing New Church teachings in our lives as a way to rise above ordinary ways of doing things.

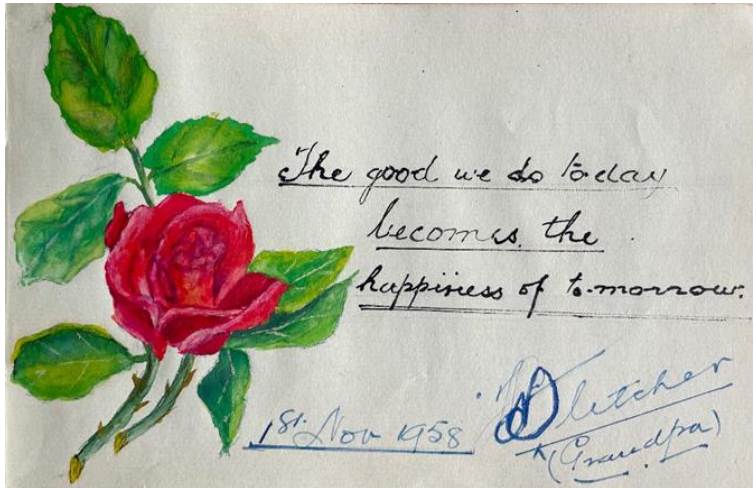
Overall it was a good event which Howard and Debra put a lot of work into organizing, catering and facilitating. I think all who attended were grateful for the work put in, and look forward to a follow up in the future.

Cripps Got Duck

A True Story by Owen Heldon

Editor's note: Unlike some churches, we don't offer testimonials during our services. However, testimonials that illustrate how religion manifests in our life can be very moving and motivational. The following story is a wonderful example of two dedicated New Church people putting their religion into life. Through it we can see the immediate joy experienced by Lawrence, but we can also imagine the impression left on the boys, who would have carried the good lesson forward in their lives as well, creating a ripple effect of goodness.

This story is set in the late 1950s and begins at 33 Neirbo Avenue Hurstville, the home of Mr and Mrs Fletcher or Grandpa and Grandma to the



two young lads who had arrived to go and see a cricket match at Hurstville Oval between Randwick and St George.

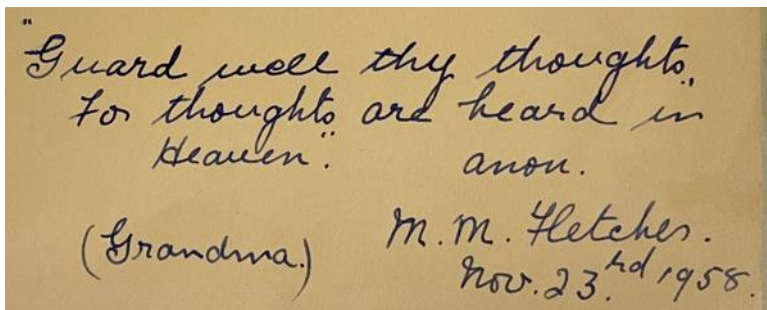
These two young lads were Owen and Murray Heldon still in Primary school and short pants. Although they were Grandpa and Grandma to these lads everyone else called them Mr and Mrs

Fletcher so that's what they will often be called in this story. We tend to forget how formal things were in those days.

Soon Mr Fletcher, in suit and tie, and Mrs Fletcher came out through the front door with big smiles for the two lads and a wave to Miss Payne next door who was waiting beside her flash car to take us all, except Mrs Fletcher, to Hurstville Oval. We were all set to go except for one thing.

Mrs Fletcher had a message for the two lads. After making sure she had our attention she explained that Miss Payne would stop at the corner of the next street to pick up Lawrence. She explained Lawrence was different to other people but it wasn't his fault. She stressed that if we had any problems to let Grandpa know and said if Grandpa noticed us making fun of Lawrence he would be very unhappy indeed.

We got the message. Grandma had a way of making sure you listened. But once she was satisfied we had got the message she said with a big smile, "Off you go and enjoy yourselves."



Owen and Murray climbed into the back seat of Miss Payne's flash car and were intrigued to watch as she picked up her tan coloured

leather driving gloves and once she was satisfied she had adjusted them just right turned to the wide eyed lads and with a smile said, “Ready boys?” (I think she knew the boys were impressed.)

Next stop was around the corner to pick up Lawrence. Lawrence was a man in his forties but due to his mental disability had a mental age of about four. Lawrence was waiting at the gate with his mother holding his cricket scorebook which Mr Fletcher had bought for him and taught him how to score, albeit with assistance. Lawrence was a cricket fanatic and these trips to Hurstville Oval on Saturday afternoons were the highlight of his life and a huge relief for his mother.

Hurstville Oval in those days often had Australia’s best batsmen playing there when not required for Sheffield shield (competition between States) or international duties. Players like Sir Donald Bradman, Norm O’Neill, Brian Booth, Ray Lindwall and others.

At this point in the story it may be of interest to recount a couple of anecdotes. My late father Norman Heldon remembers Bradman playing at Hurstville Oval in the 1930s. He said if Bradman was batting the ground was packed with spectators but when he got out – if he got out – most of the crowd would slowly disperse into the surrounding streets.

Hurstville Oval was a great place for kids like us to observe our cricketing idols at close quarters and proffer our autograph books for their signature, which they were happy to sign. Also it is of note that in those days cricketers did not earn million dollar contracts. Like tennis players of the time they were “amateurs” and often

needed a sympathetic employer who could make special arrangements to be able to play representative matches. For example Norm O'Neill was a representative of Rothmans, a cigarette company!!

Cricket was also not played on Sundays. Brian Booth, a deeply religious man refused to play State and international cricket when Sunday matches were introduced.

But I digress. On the day in question Randwick is batting and the first wicket has fallen. Alan Cripps their best batsman has arrived at the crease. He asks the umpire for middle and off stump and marks out his guard. Then he has a good look around the field and notes the positions of all the fieldsmen.

There is a sense of excitement around the ground as Cripps settles down over his bat tapping it lightly on the crease. The bowler approaches the wicket, gaining speed with every stride and delivers the ball.

Suddenly a loud shout echoes around the ground. "Howzat?" All the St George team are appealing to the umpire. Lawrence senses the excitement but doesn't quite realise what is happening. And now another shout. This time it comes from the spectators in the grandstand where Lawrence and Mr Fletcher and the two lads are sitting. Lawrence looks around turning his head from side to side. He knows something really exciting has happened.

Mr Fletcher taps Lawrence on the shoulder. "Pick up your scorebook," he calls to get Lawrence's attention. "Open it," Mr

Fletcher says, then helps Lawrence complete the entry. There is a pause as they look at each other. Mr Fletcher, with a gentle smile points towards the entry in the scorebook. Lawrence looks back at it. And then it hits him!

“Cripps got duck,” he says. Mr Fletcher nods and his smile broadens. “Cripps got duck,” Lawrence’s voice rises. “Cripps got duck,” he shouts. By this time he was on his feet. “Cripps got duck.” Now he was climbing the stairs in that ungainly way he had still holding the scorebook open at the page he had just completed. “Cripps got duck,” he kept saying showing the entry in the scorebook to people either side of the stairs. Eventually someone who knew him ushered him back to his seat beside Mr Fletcher. There was a lot of good humour all round including Lawrence, who was a regular here and known by many in the grandstand.

There is another story about Lawrence. Some readers may know that there was once a New Church Day School at the Hurstville Society from 1930 to 1934. It was run by Miss Mora White, originally from South Australia who went to the New Church College in Bryn Athyn USA to train to be a New Church teacher with the sole purpose of returning to open the school.

Miss White, who had come to know Lawrence invited him to attend on Friday afternoons to the school which was Sports Day. He loved it. Then aged in his late teens or early 20s he wasn’t able to actually play the organised sport with the school children due to his mental disability but he loved chasing balls and running around and most importantly being there with the children. They were

under strict instructions not to make fun of Lawrence and treating him with respect was a part of their education.

The school had to close in 1934 when Miss White married. In those days it was the custom for a wife to stay home and look after the children. She became the Mrs Fletcher of our story. She was my grandmother and Sunday School teacher and I can affirm that she was a very good teacher indeed.

Footnote: Photographs are from the autograph book mentioned in the story.

Commiseration

A minister waited in line to have his car filled with petrol just before a long holiday weekend. The attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him. Finally, the attendant motioned him toward a vacant pump.

"Reverend," said the young man, "I'm so sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip."

The minister chuckled, "I know what you mean. It's the same in my business."

Birthdays

January: Margaret Heldon (9th), Kerry Lockhart (24th), Kaye Macfarlane (30th)

February: John Hicks (9th), Mike Lockhart (11th)

What's "new" about the "New Church"?

This is a very common question, to be sure. Well, it all started just over 200 years ago... The main branches of the Christian church had become less correct, and one man named Emanuel Swedenborg had written volumes about how Christianity was missing the point. Some readers of Swedenborg realised he was right, and formed a new organisation that would strip away the centuries of politics and tradition and get back to what Christianity was supposed to be about: loving God and loving each other. Everything else could be seen as merely a difference of opinion if those two main principles reigned supreme through this new church.

As a result we believe in a positive Christianity, one where we look to the best in ourselves and others while still holding ourselves accountable to a higher standard and taking responsibility for our lives. Nowadays we're not so much "new" as we are "different". We still keep the name, and yet make every effort to incorporate the ideals that were instrumental in being "new" over two centuries ago.

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