

Palestinians Return to Find North Gaza Neighborhoods Reduced to Rubble

for the Week of February 9, 2025

In the News

Some 500,000 displaced Palestinians began returning to their homes or the ruins of their neighborhoods in the northern Gaza Strip on Monday, January 27, 2025, after Israeli forces opened the Netzarim corridor, which separates north and south Gaza, as part of a ceasefire negotiated between Israel and Hamas.

After Hamas militants attacked southern Israel October 7, 2023, killing 1,200 people and seizing 250 hostages, Israel launched a massive counterattack aimed at eliminating Hamas. Palestinian health authorities say that Israeli military strikes have killed 47,000 Palestinians -- more than half women and children -- injured 100,000, displaced around 90% of Gaza's 2.3 million people, and destroyed or damaged about 70% of all structures in the Gaza Strip, according to the United Nations. Only 1,800 hospital beds are available for the entire region, and no educational institutions or libraries survived.

With vehicles and fuel in short supply, about a third of those headed north did so on foot, climbing over heaps of debris, slogging through mud, and struggling to avoid hidden explosive devices left over from the military campaign. Most of the returnees have not been able to go home for more than a year.

Due to the enormous piles of rubble from bombed-out buildings, there is no space in northern Gaza to set up camps for displaced people returning home, said Mohammad Salha, director of Al-Awda Hospital in Tal Al-Zaatar. Upon seeing the situation, some who made the trek north turned around and headed back to the refugee camps in the south from whence they came.

Khamis and Ahmad Imarah, two brothers who were both widowed by Israeli air strikes, returned home to Gaza City because their father and brother are still buried under the rubble. All that is left of their home is one partly damaged room.

"When I came back here my heart was ripped apart. The only thing that brought me back was my father and brother," Khamis said. "I don't want anything else." Of the 60 members of their extended family, only 11 have survived the war. Khamis' wife and baby daughter died in an Israeli strike, just a week after the child was born. He doesn't even have a picture of his newborn. He can't even visit their graves, he said, because a few days after they were buried, the Israeli military erased them with bulldozers.

"They didn't leave a thing," he said. "We came back to the north for nothing."

Despite the devastation, Khamis said he's not leaving Gaza, unless it is to go to heaven. "We will not leave this place, because this land is not ours but our grandparents' and our ancestors' before us. How am I supposed to leave it? To leave the house of my father, and grandfather and brothers?" he said.

Another traveler who joined the journey north was Monzer al-Sharafi, who hadn't seen his parents for 15 months.

"I am excited, but I still have mixed feelings," he said. "It's the sadness we've endured, and it's the joy of meeting our loved ones and stopping the bloodbath in Gaza. I see destruction

everywhere I look," al-Sharafi added. "I can't recognize the streets and my way in Gaza. I feel like I am a foreigner."

Picking through the rubble, he found his daughter's teddy bear and broke down in tears. "I lost all my memories," he said. "Sadly, [my family is] in a tent there, and I will bring them here to another tent. I will bring them from one hard place to another."

How returnees will manage, with clean water, food, sanitation, fuel, electricity, housing, medical care and other essential goods and services in short supply, is uncertain. The questions of who will govern the territory and how Gaza can be reconstructed remain.

More on this story can be found at these links:

'My Home Is No Longer There': Palestinians Return to North Gaza. BBC

'We Came Back for Nothing': Returning Home to Northern Gaza, Palestinians Find Death and Destruction. CNN

This Is What One Family in Gaza Returned Home To After 15 Months of War. AP News

Palestinians Return to Ruined Homes in North Gaza as Ceasefire Sparks Exodus 'From One Hard Place to Another.' CBS News

Applying the News Story

Gaza is mentioned 20 times in the Bible and 15 times in the Apocrypha. Zephaniah prophesied that Gaza and other coastal cities would be deserted, desolate, driven out, uprooted, and destroyed "until no inhabitant is left," with the result that "[t]he seacoast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah."

In a passage that evokes Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the prophet Zechariah speaks

of Gaza "[writhing] in anguish," which will, however, "be a remnant for our God; ... like a clan in Judah"; the king who comes to Jerusalem humble, riding on a donkey, will "command peace to the nations," and "take away its blood from the mouth" of Philistia (the region in which Gaza was located). Does this mean that those who have suffered so much in Gaza will one day be considered part of God's people, who have forsaken violence and embraced the ways of peace?

We note that "remnant" is used to refer to both Judah and Gaza. A remnant can refer to what's left when most of the cloth on a bolt of fabric has been used or sold. Both groups suffer loss, and yet the hope of the gospel is that God "gathers up the leftovers," so that nothing is lost (Luke 9:16-17).

The Big Questions

1. How do people recover when nothing is left?

2. What would it take for people in this conflict to find common ground that might allow them to work through their differences to come to a place of mutual security?
3. How might dehumanization be used as a weapon of war? What words might be used to deny the basic humanity of people with whom we may disagree?
4. Is it possible to avoid conflating Jewish people with the Israeli government? Can we avoid conflating Palestinian people with Hamas militants? Should we? Why or why not?
5. How should Christians relate to Israelis and Palestinians? What role, if any, should the church in the West have in this conflict?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Nehemiah 1:3-4, 8-9

They replied, "The remnant there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ... Remember the word that you commanded Moses your servant, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I have chosen to establish my name.' ... (For context, read Nehemiah 1:1- 11.)

Nehemiah, an Israelite living in exile as a servant of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, received a visit from his brother Hanani and other men from Judah, who told him about the destruction of the protective wall that had surrounded Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was overcome with grief at the news, mourning, fasting and praying for days. He affirmed God's faithfulness and steadfast love, confessed the sins of his people, and included himself as one of those who had sinned. Then he asked God to remember his pledge to punish his people if they were unfaithful, but to restore them if they returned to him.

Questions: What similarities might there be between the experience of the Israelites in Nehemiah's time and in other times in the history of the Jews, and the experience of the Palestinians? How might reflection on those similarities build empathy for one another in the current conflict between Palestinians and Israelis?

Lamentations 1:1-2, 11-12

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become subject to forced labor. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers, she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they

have become her enemies. ... All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their lives. Look, O LORD, and see how worthless I have become. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. (For context, read Lamentations 1:1-7, 11- 16.)

This book describes the agony of the people over the destruction of their capital city of Jerusalem. The language hints that the city has only herself to blame for her desolation; she had pursued lovers (other gods) and forsaken God who loved her. Then when she was in trouble, those lovers abandoned her. All her glory turned to ashes in her mouth, as she pawned her treasures for crusts of bread just to survive.

While the text is specific to the people of Judah, the people of Gaza (and other groups that have suffered displacement and war) might find it easy to relate to the feelings of bitterness and grief expressed.

Questions: When, if ever, have you experienced a loss on the scale of the city of Jerusalem in our text, or of the people of Gaza in our news article? Why might such a loss lead to feelings of worthlessness? What would it take to rebuild a community's sense of worth after such devastation? How would you respond if a Gazan asked you, "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow"? How might that question sound coming from the mouth of the man who was beaten by robbers and left for dead, who was helped by the Samaritan we call "good" (Luke 10:29-37)?

Matthew 18:15-17

[Jesus said,] "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. (For context, read Matthew 18:15-17, 21-35.)

Here Jesus instructs his disciples what they should do when a brother or sister (fellow believer) sins against you. The goal of confrontation is not to condemn the offender, but to get at the truth of what happened, and hopefully to reach an understanding and restoration of a broken relationship. Questions: Do these instructions apply only to private, personal relationships, or might they offer some principles that could also apply to larger conflicts between people groups? Are they only applicable within the context of the church, or can they be useful in secular situations, as well? What principles, if any, might be helpful in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?

Ephesians 2:13-16, 19

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the

dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ... So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ... (For context, read Ephesians 2:13-22.)

Paul taught that in Christ, the hostility that divided Jew and Gentile is broken down. Through his death on the cross, all people, whatever their ethnicity or religious pedigree, may be reconciled to God. Christ is the peace who creates in himself one new humanity in place of two. There is no longer an "in" group and an "out" group, but all have access through the Spirit of Christ to God.

Questions: How might this truth be helpful in bringing people in the Holy Land together as one? How does the Gospel help us see others as "no longer strangers and aliens, but [as] fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God"?

For Further Discussion

1. React to this, from Daniel Munayer, Executive Director of Musalaha, an organization of evangelical Palestinian Christians and Israeli Messianic Jews: "I turn to the New Testament example of Jesus bringing together Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector. These two men came from opposite ideological backgrounds. Tax collectors collaborated with the Roman Empire, profiting from occupation, while Zealots engaged in violent resistance, using tactics like assassinations and hostage-taking. Jesus' calling of both men into his movement was radical. Matthew had to relinquish his privileged position and join the struggle for liberation and reconciliation, while Simon had to abandon violent resistance that risked dehumanizing the oppressor. This model of reconciliation holds both the thirst for justice and the embrace of peace. It reminds us that true redemption is found not in choosing between liberation or reconciliation but in holding them together."

2. Discuss these points from Rula Khoury Mansour, the founder and director of Nazareth Center for Peace Studies: In our conflict everyone thinks they have exclusive ownership of the truth, this way we end up trapped in a cycle of blame and revenge. Shared truth calls for a shift from 'truth-owning' to 'truth-seeking,' which requires the humility to recognize that we may not have the full picture or might even be misinformed. It also demands a willingness to listen to others' perspectives, even when they challenge our convictions or sense of identity.

Forgiveness doesn't pretend the past didn't happen or overlook justice; it creates room for healing and truth-telling. ... Achieving reconciliation requires confronting systemic injustices, addressing root causes, and ensuring a just resolution for all parties involved. Without justice, peace is hollow; and without forgiveness, justice becomes another weapon in the fight.

Memory plays an important role in forgiveness. Remembering allows us to process events without denial, reclaiming and interpreting them in light of the present and future. This process contributes to healing and may generate empathy for the 'enemy's humanity,' enabling

forbearance, and even self-forgiveness for perpetrators. Since Christ comes not to ask us to forget the past but to redeem it, 'forgive and forget' becomes ... 'remember and repent' for perpetrators and 'remember and forgive' for victims.

Responding to the News

1. Musalaha means "reconciliation" in Arabic. You might wish to use their January 2025 newsletter prayer list to guide your personal or congregational prayer for the Middle East during this time of crisis.
2. Some resources from different perspectives you may find of interest:

Nonviolence in the Holy Land (Video with Palestinian nonviolent activist Sami Awad) (55:02)

Holy Land Trust

Community Peacemaker Teams

Jewish Voice for Peace

Friends of Sabeel-North America

Haaretz (major newspaper in Israel)

From Ground Zero (Academy Award nominee) -- 22 short films by Gazan filmmakers)

No Other Land (short-listed for Academy Award)

The Bethlehem Institute of Peace and Justice (online and residential training in peacemaking and justice in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict)

Prayer (suggested by 2 Corinthians 13:11; 1 Corinthians 7:15; Luke 10:6; Luke 19:42; Luke 1:79; Isaiah 9:6; Galatians 5:22-23; Romans 14:19)

God of love and peace, who has called us to live in peace, we pray for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Make us people of peace. Help us to recognize the things that make for peace, and guide our feet into the way of peace as we follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace. May your Holy Spirit produce in us the fruit of peaceful relationships as we pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Amen!