



Jerusalem: God's Holy City

Jerusalem is the most sacred city on earth, chosen by God to be the site of His dwelling place in our world. Whether we know its history and significance or not, everyone feels connected to this holy city. For the Jewish people, Jerusalem remains the most important city on earth. For 2,000 years, the Jews never forgot Jerusalem. It is mentioned three times a day in prayer, and Jews are the only people in the world who face Jerusalem when praying, no matter where they might be. Every year during Passover we exclaim the hopeful words “Next year in Jerusalem.” God’s Holy City was, is, and always will be the place Jews yearn for.

Jerusalem represents the golden age of the Jewish people, when we were strong militarily, economically, and most importantly, spiritually. In Psalm 48:2, Jerusalem is called “*the joy of the whole earth*.” At its height, Jerusalem was a beacon of light and a source of joy for the whole world. After the city fell and the bitter exile began, Jerusalem became a source of mourning and longing. Yet, Jerusalem has also held our hope for the future, for a time when its glory will be fully restored once again.

For Christians, Jerusalem holds great spiritual significance as well. Jesus spent time there, teaching and worshiping at the Temple. When he was a baby, Mary and Joseph presented him to the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is where Jesus made his triumphal entry, where he was crucified, where the Christian church was birthed, and where today Christian pilgrims follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Paralleling Jewish theology, Christian Scriptures refer to the future kingdom as the New Jerusalem.

In this Fellowship Study, we will look at the deep significance of Jerusalem and its relevance to Jews, Christians, and the entire world. Join us as we explore her secrets and anticipate her eternity.



Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King.

— PSALM 48:1-2



A City of Unity and Love

Thousands of years ago, King David called Jerusalem “a city that is bound firmly together.” The Jewish sages explained that this description is not about the physical structure of the city, but about the nature of its inhabitants. From its beginning, Jerusalem was intended to be a city that connects people and brings strangers together.

Today, one can literally witness this apt description. Jews from all four corners of the world have come home to Jerusalem to form one nation. Others, Jewish and Christian, come from around the globe on pilgrimages to Jerusalem and find that they leave different than they were before. Christians encounter the Jewish people and their roots in a way not possible anywhere else in the world. For Jews, thousands of years of history and exile come together in one great story.

In ancient times people connected in Jerusalem for a very practical reason: Three times a year, on the appointed festivals of Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks), and Sukkot (the Festival of Tabernacles), the Israelites would make their pilgrimages to Jerusalem as instructed by the Bible. That meant that three times a year Jerusalem was the place where people could see each other, reconnect, or meet for the first time. Jerusalem united the people while enabling them to bond with God.

Christians will find it meaningful that Jesus and his family traveled to Jerusalem for these festivals as well. In fact, it was when they had traveled to the Temple for Passover that Mary and Joseph inadvertently left him behind. They were an entire day’s journey back toward home before they realized the then 12-year old Jesus wasn’t with them. After returning to Jerusalem and searching for three days, they eventually found Jesus in the Temple, listening to the teaching of the rabbis and asking them questions.

Jerusalem was a place to gather, learn, and exchange ideas. Thankfully, it still is. Today you can find Jews and Christians alike on spiritual pilgrimage, moved by the place where their spiritual forefathers trod, where events from the Bible unfolded, and where the Western Wall—the only remaining structure of the Holy Temple—offers sacred ground to gather for prayer.

Even during the exile, Jerusalem continued to serve as a unifying factor for the Jewish people. While Jews were scattered around the world, our hearts united around Jerusalem—which we prayed for, longed for, and pledged never to forget. Today, Jews and Christians alike believe that people of faith will be gathered to Jerusalem in the last days, united in this city by our love for God and our joy as the messianic era begins.

Past and present, Jerusalem has always been the heart of the nation of Israel, bringing about love and fostering unity. This is our strength, and Jerusalem is its source.



*Jerusalem – built as a city
that is bound firmly together*

— PSALM 122:3 (ESV)

Where Heaven Meets Earth

Since the beginning of time, Jerusalem has been the meeting place of heaven and earth. Jewish tradition teaches that Creation began in Jerusalem and that Adam was created from the dust of the earth in Jerusalem. It was the place where Abraham took his son Isaac to be sacrificed. David later purchased that same site to build an altar to God. David's land eventually became the Temple Mount, and the Temple would officially serve as the connection between God and man for nearly 1,000 years.

Jerusalem is like no other city in the world. According to the Bible, there are many commandments that could only be fulfilled within the walls of God's city. The special status of Jerusalem was derived from the Holy Temple. And yet, the holiness of Jerusalem existed before the construction of the Temple and remains after its destruction. This is why, thousands of years after the destruction of the Temple, all Jews face Jerusalem when they pray.

The patriarch Jacob expressed it best after he awoke from his famous dream of a ladder that spanned heaven and earth. Upon awakening, Jacob exclaimed: *"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven"* (Genesis 28:17).

The sages explain that Jacob had fallen asleep in the place where Jerusalem one day would be built, specifically, at the very location where the world began and the Temple would stand. He had stumbled upon the very *"gate of heaven."*

Under the leadership of Moses, the people were first instructed to build a sanctuary in which God would dwell (Exodus 25:8), but this structure (the tabernacle, a moveable tent) would only be temporary. The ultimate plan was to build a permanent structure in a place that God would choose. The chosen place was revealed to King David as Mount Moriah in Jerusalem and the Temple was built by his son King Solomon.

Solomon prayed these words at the Temple dedication ceremony: *"May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place"* (2 Chronicles 6:20). To this very day, Judaism maintains that all prayers ascend to heaven through Jerusalem. Similarly, all blessings pass through Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

In the messianic era, the third and final Temple is prophesied to be built in Jerusalem. In the extensive vision of the new Temple given to Ezekiel (Ezekiel 40–48), which includes detailed descriptions of the restoration of the Temple, the altar, the priesthood, and the land of Israel, he is told that the name of the new city from then on will be *"the LORD is there."*



When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

— GENESIS 28:16-17

Customs and Rituals Observed Today

Today, since the destruction of the Temple, most customs associated with Jerusalem revolve around remembering and praying for God's Holy City. As the psalmist wrote: *"If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill."*

After the Temples were destroyed traditions were instituted to keep the Jewish people focused on their homeland and true destiny. For example, many Jews leave a portion of our homes unfinished or decorated with Jerusalem-themed artwork to indicate that we are not complete until Jerusalem is restored. Jerusalem is a main theme in Jewish prayer, and we pray for our return to Jerusalem three times each day. In addition we *"pray for the peace of Jerusalem"* (Psalm 122:6).

The most intense Jewish ritual in remembrance of Jerusalem is the observance of Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, on which both Temples were destroyed hundreds of years apart.

Since Jerusalem was reunited in 1967, we have additional customs. Since we now have access to Jerusalem and the Western Wall, on the three pilgrim holidays of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, thousands gather at the Western Wall to receive the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24–26).

A holiday for our modern times, Jerusalem Day, is observed on the anniversary of the city's liberation and reunification under Jewish rule.

Motivated by Psalm 122:6, *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,"* many Christians regularly lift the Holy City in prayer, and some even participate in groups that meet regularly to ask God to protect the Holy City and the Jewish State. Others read Isaiah 49:22, *"Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders"* (KJV), and are motivated to support the *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) of Jewish people living in other countries, especially those Jews experiencing the growing tide of anti-Semitism.



Photo: Chaim Goldberg/Flash90

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

— PSALM 137:5-6

Think About It

1. Read 1 Chronicles 15:11–28, 1 Kings 8:1–13, Isaiah 31:5, and Psalm 132:13–18. What do these verses tell you about God's attitudes and intent for Jerusalem?
2. Read Psalm 122 and 137. What do these passages teach about Jerusalem and its significance?
3. Read Genesis 14:17–24, Jeremiah 22:3, Matthew 25:35, and Hebrews 13:2. How do these verses shape your attitude toward strangers?
4. Read Luke 2:41–45, Mark 11:15–17, Matthew 21:1–10, and Acts 2:1–15. How do these events that transpired in Jerusalem lend it significance for Christians?
5. Everyone has their own "Jerusalem," their own ideal of peace and wholeness. What is your "Jerusalem"? What steps can you take toward this place of wholeness?
6. In what ways have your impressions of Jerusalem changed after this study? What actions can you take in light of this new knowledge?



Apply It

1. **JOURNEY TOWARD GOD.** Just as the ancient Israelites made a special pilgrimage to bond with God, consider how you, too, can strengthen your bond with God by going on a personal retreat or visiting a unique place of worship.
2. **CONNECT WITH STRANGERS.** One of the special qualities of Jerusalem is bringing people from all countries, cultures, and religions together. Make it a point to befriend someone who is different from you and learn from them.
3. **REMEMBER JERUSALEM.** Incorporate ways that you can remember Jerusalem throughout the day.
4. **SPEAK OUT!** In a world that often misrepresents the truth about Israel and Jerusalem, it is our biblical duty to speak up for what is true and right.
5. **PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM.** Share your prayers by visiting ifcj.org/pray.

