

World Religions

Better understanding our neighbors and their beliefs

Week Eight: Judaism

Series overview: As we get to know our neighbors, many of us are met with a rich collection of people from cultures worldwide. With so many religions and backgrounds represented in our community, you may find yourself wondering more about the people who surround you. What do they believe? How do I relate to people coming from experiences far different from mine? And most of all, how do I interact with my neighbors in a way that shows love and respect?

This week's message: Compared to the other major religions, with adherents numbering in the billions, Judaism is relatively small. It is estimated that only 14-15 million people practice Judaism. Nevertheless, Jewish history plays a huge role in the formation of other major religions, and the Jewish people maintain a strange influence in the world.

The basis of Judaism is the Torah, comprised of the first five books of the Old Testament. The religion centralizes around the idea of a covenant established between God and Abraham, extending a promise of land, family, and blessing to the Jewish people. We see this promise revisited throughout the Old Testament, which chronicles the history of the Jewish people and their interaction with God, and includes prophecies of an expected Messiah. The Jews rejected Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies because of his purpose, lineage, verse mistranslations about Jesus, and lack of collective revelation to the nation.

After the unsuccessful Jewish revolts against Rome around 70 AD, the Jews spent hundreds of years scattered, suffering extreme persecution and exclusion from the Christian parts of Europe, often times being referred to as "Christ killers." The rise of anti-Semitism culminated at the Holocaust, where one third of the Jewish peoples were wiped out.

Modern Judaism has three main branches, all which value action above belief:

- Orthodox: adhere to the traditional teaching of Jewish law and oral law; unswerving loyalty to Jewish traditions as recognized by authorities in each generation
- Reformed: stress the importance of adapting religious life to the spirit and mood of the modern age; emphasize belief that Jews were given a mission to promote good ideas, like justice, peace, and love, to the world
- Conservative: hold that sacred Jewish laws may be adapted to modern conditions of life, but only by an authority, and not done away with altogether; bridges the gap between the other two branches

Small Group Discussion:

➤ Connect

- What has your exposure and interaction been with the three branches of modern Judaism?

➤ Grow

- Read Genesis 12:1-3. What does it mean when God promises to bless all people on earth through Abraham?
- Jews were blamed for the crucifixion of Christ for hundreds of years, as Christians focused on the supposed reasons for his death rather than the true purpose of his death. How does 2 Corinthians 5:21 shift that perspective? Why is this distinction important?
- The Jewish people focus on practice over doctrine. What verses would you refer to that provide Christians freedom from a work-based theology?
- Read Acts 28:17-30. What example does Paul give us?
- Why would it behoove us, as Christians, to learn more about Jewish history and the Jewish people?
- How familiar are you with God's future plan for Israel as laid out in prophecy?

➤ Reach

- One City. Love a Jewish person this week by asking and listening to what they practice, what their experience has been, and what they believe. How else can you love your Jewish friends well?
- One Nation. Pray for our country – that peaceful spiritual conversations will spark between Christians and Jews as they build relationships and discuss their similarities and differences.
- One World. Pray for the Jewish people – for healing from the hurt and mistrust that has resulted from their history; for Christians around the world to show them God's love; for God to reveal His truth to them.

Prayer Focus

Read Ephesians 3. Thank God this week for His perfect plan for you. Identify specific ways He has extended grace, promises, freedom, confidence, strength, purpose, and love to you in your life. Give Him praise for these blessings, and ask that He help you not waste all of His provision.

Scripture Memory

"The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"

Genesis 12:1-3