##### **HANDOUT #1: The Tragic History of the Jews**

Looking at the rather tragic history of the Jewish people, one is not inclined to think there has been any advantage in being a Jew. In spite of the reality that they are such a noble strain of humanity and chosen by God, their history has been a saga of slavery, hardship, warfare, persecution, slander, captivity, dispersion, and humiliation.

They were menial slaves in Egypt for some 400 years, and after God miraculously delivered them, they wandered in a barren wilderness for forty years, until an entire generation died out. When they eventually entered the land God had promised them, they had to fight to gain every square foot of it and continue to fight to protect what they gained. After several hundred years, civil war divided the nation. The northern kingdom eventually was almost decimated by Assyria, with the remnant being taken captive to that country. Later, the southern kingdom was conquered and exiled in Babylon for seventy years, after which some were allowed to return to Palestine.

Not long after they rebuilt their homeland, they were conquered by Greece, and the despotic Antiochus Epiphanes revelled in desecrating their Temple, corrupting their sacrifices, and slaughtering their priests. Under Roman rule they fared no better. Tens of thousands of Jewish rebels were publicly crucified, and under Herod the Great scores of male Jewish babies were slaughtered because of his insane jealousy of the Christ child. In the year A.D. 70, the Roman general Titus Vespasian carried out Caesar's order to utterly destroy Jerusalem, its Temple, and most of its citizens. According to Josephus, over a million Jews of all ages were mercilessly butchered, and some 100,000 of those who survived were sold into slavery or sent to Rome to die in the gladiator games. Two years previously, Gentiles in Caesarea had killed 20,000 Jews and sold many more into slavery. During that same period of time, the inhabitants of Damascus cut the throats of 10,000 Jews in a single day.

In A.D. 115 the Jews of Cyrene, Egypt, Cyprus, and Mesopotamia rebelled against Rome. When they failed, Emperor Hadrian destroyed 985 towns in Palestine and killed at least 600,000 Jewish men. Thousands more perished from starvation and disease. So many Jews were sold into slavery that the price of an able-bodied male slave dropped to that of a horse. In the year 380 Emperor Theodosius I formulated a legal code that declared Jews to be an inferior race of human beings—a demonic idea that strongly permeated most of Europe for over a thousand years and that even persists in many parts of the world in our own day.

For some two centuries the Jews were oppressed by the Byzantine branch of the divided Roman empire. Emperor Heroclitus banished them from Jerusalem in 628 and later tried to exterminate them. Leo the Assyrian gave them the choice of converting to Christianity or being banished from the realm. When the first crusade was launched in 1096 to recapture the Holy Land from the Ottoman Turks, the crusaders slaughtered countless thousands of Jews on their way to Palestine, brutally trampling many to death under their horses' hooves. That carnage, of course, was committed in the name of Christianity.

In 1254 King Louis IX banished all Jews from France. When many later returned to that country, Philip the Fair expelled 100,000 of them again in 1306. In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain even as Columbus began his first voyage across the Atlantic, and four years later they were expelled from Portugal as well. Soon most of western Europe was closed to them except for a few areas in northern Italy, Germany, and Poland. Although the French Revolution emancipated many Jews, vicious anti-Semitism continued to dominate most of Europe and parts of Russia. Thousands of Jews were massacred in the Ukraine in 1818. In 1894, because of growing anti-Semitism in the French army a Jewish officer named Dreyfus was falsely accused of treason, and that charge was used as an excuse to purge the military of all Jews of high rank.

When a number of influential Jews began to dream of re-establishing a homeland in Palestine, the Zionist movement was born, its first congress being convened in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. By 1914, some 90,000 Jews had settled in Palestine. In the unparalleled Nazi holocaust of the early 1940s at least 6,000,000 Jews were exterminated, this time for racial rather than religious reasons.

Although in our society anti-Semitism is seldom expressed so openly, Jews in many parts of the world still suffer for no other reason than their *Jewishness*. From the purely historical perspective, therefore, Jews have been among the most continuously and harshly disadvantaged people of all time.

Not only have Jews historically had little social or political security, but in [Romans 2:17-20](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+2%3A17-20) Paul declares that, although they are God's specially chosen and blessed people, Jews do not even have guaranteed *spiritual* security—either by physical lineage or religious heritage. Being born a descendant of Abraham, knowing God's law and being circumcised did not assure them a place in heaven. In fact, rather than protecting Jews from God's judgment, those blessings made them all the more accountable for obedience to the Lord.

After having demolished the false securities on which most Jews relied, Paul anticipated the strong objections his Jewish readers would make. The truths he sets forth in the book of Romans he had taught many times before in many places, and he knew what the most common objections in Rome would be.

The apostle did not teach that Jewish heritage and the Mosaic law ceremonies were not important. Because they were God-given, they had tremendous importance. But they were not in Paul's day, and had never been, the means of satisfying the divine standard of righteousness. They offered Jews great spiritual advantages, but they did not provide spiritual security.After his conversion, Paul continued to worship in the Temple when he was in Jerusalem and faithfully practiced the moral teachings of the Mosaic law. He personally circumcised Timothy who was Jewish on his mother's side, as a concession to the Jews in the region of Galatia ([Acts 16:1-3](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+16%3A1-3)). He even continued to follow many of the ceremonial customs and the rabbinical patterns in order not to give undue offense to legalistic Jews, as noted in [Acts 21:24-26](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+21%3A24-26).

#### But the essence of his preaching was that none of those outward acts have any saving benefit and that a person can become right with God only through trust in His Son Jesus Christ.