

# *Sojourn in the Land of My King*



## **Memoirs of a Christian in Israel**

**By**

**Miranda A. Darling**

**Editing by Todd R. Darling**

*Other Books by This Author*

*True Love - The Joy of Biblical Marriage*

*The Beginning of Wisdom - Biblical Christianity*

*Only One Anchor - Peace for the Anxious Soul*

All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

## Table of Contents

- Chapter 1: The Birth of a Plan
- Chapter 2: Departures and Arrivals
- Chapter 3: Great Beginnings
- Chapter 4: Heading North
- Chapter 5: Tiberias
- Chapter 6: Capernaum
- Chapter 7: The Galilee and St. Peter's Fish
- Chapter 8: Tel Dan and Cappuccinos
- Chapter 9: Caesarea Philippi, and Nimrod's  
Fortress
- Chapter 10: Gideon Springs, Beit She'an, and  
Baptism
- Chapter 11: The Dead Sea
- Chapter 12: Masada and Dead Sea Swimming
- Chapter 13: Ein Gedi
- Chapter 14: Dead Sea Scrolls and Camels
- Chapter 15: Arriving in Jerusalem
- Chapter 16: Garden of Gethsemane and Palm  
Sunday Road
- Chapter 17: Todd's Story
- Chapter 18: Miranda's Story
- Chapter 19: Southern Steps and The Jewish Quarter
- Chapter 20: Temple Mount and City of David
- Chapter 21: Western Wall and Pools of Bethesda
- Chapter 22: Free Day
- Chapter 23: Shepherds' Fields, Elah Valley, and  
Ashkelon
- Chapter 24: Museum Day
- Chapter 25: Garden Tomb and Goodbye
- Chapter 26: Epilogue

*Therefore, I will remember You from the land of the Jordan.*

*Psalm 42:6*

~

*My heart is overflowing with a good theme;  
I recite my composition concerning the King;*

*My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.*

*Psalm 45:1*

~

## Chapter One

### The Birth of a Plan

My husband, Todd, and I were standing up at the end of church services one day back in 2005. In his closing comments, our pastor reminded everyone of an upcoming 2006 Israel Tour sign-up sheet and encouraged the congregation to seriously consider going on such a spiritually life-changing trip. As we gathered our Bibles and belongings to go home, Todd looked at me with a grin on his face and said, "I think we should go on that Israel trip". We were relatively new believers at the time; both of us had given our lives over to the headship of Jesus Christ and become born again during the year 2000 (which was also the year we were married). Additionally, we were somewhat new at this particular church, having only begun attending a year earlier, so naturally, I looked at my husband as though he were crazy (truly, he often was) and immediately responded something to the effect of, "I would never go to Israel, it's far too dangerous. Why would you even say such a thing?"

My personal idea of a worthy vacation had always consisted of the two of us relaxing on a beautiful beach somewhere very warm and sunny. The goal was usually to spend our days soaking up dazzling rays of sunshine and enjoying balmy, tropical breezes; completely unwinding from the cares and concerns of daily life as we endlessly gaze out toward

sparkling blue ocean waves frothing cheerfully white as they rhythmically crash onto a soft, sandy shoreline. Now THAT is a vacation worth taking! The last thing in the world I wanted to spend precious money or time on at that point in our lives, was an arduous-sounding two weeks of hiking, bus-riding, and touring what appeared to me to be an extremely dangerous, middle eastern location. While the pastor was certainly experienced at leading annual Bible study trips throughout the land of Israel and had been doing so since the 1970's, I simply felt zero desire to make such a pilgrimage, particularly as the news seemed to continually indicate a considerable amount of anti-Semitic violence was ceaselessly plaguing the nation of Israel.

Nevertheless, Todd merely smiled at my undisguisedly negative reaction to his suggestion and replied, "I think we should pray about it and see what happens." Well, I do not recall my exact words, but I am certain my reply was something quite stubborn and probably fell along the lines of, "There's nothing to pray about. We are *never* going there." Little did I know what God had in store for us. "Never" lasted about three months long that year. Indeed, as time passed, periodically the Israel trip would be addressed during various Sunday morning announcements from the pulpit, mostly with regard to how many people were signed up as well as reminders of certain meetings, deadlines, and the down payments required. Strangely, it began to seem as though every time our

pastor uttered the words “Israel trip” I caught myself perking up my ears and tuning in to what he had to say. The pastor also often found ways to reference a number of exceptionally special tour experiences or relevant biblical sites located in Israel, as he taught our congregation from the Bible on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights.

Inexplicably, it became more and more intriguing for me to consider the idea of actually walking in places where the people we read about in the Bible surely walked, including Jesus Christ Himself. God was very gently working in my heart without me entirely realizing it, until finally, one Sunday I suddenly glanced at Todd as we sat in the church pew and whispered to him with wide, somewhat shocked eyes, “I think I want to go to Israel.” His face lit up and he laughed and exclaimed, “Of course you do!”

In hindsight I am reminded of the Proverbs verse, *A man’s heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)* I certainly never planned on wanting to go to Israel but sure enough, God directed my steps in a completely different direction than what I had ever dreamed of or planned. Fourteen years later, as I now contemplate and write down what transpired that particular year and all the following years in which we repeatedly made the Israel Tour pilgrimage –how radically my attitude was totally shifted through no volition or desire of my own – I am humbled by His gentle yet powerful pull on my heart, and I remain

utterly astonished by the deep-seated transformation God accomplished within me in such a short time period.

From that point forward Todd and I immediately began attending the occasional “Israel Trip Meetings” our pastor held after Sunday services, in order to learn more about the tour and what was expected. Eventually we wrote out checks for the first down payments and began researching the weather, time change, and cultural norms. I even tried to learn all I could about Israeli cuisine – which, according to the pictures and descriptions I found, appeared to be very vibrant, fresh, healthy, colorful, and totally fascinating. Our excitement grew by leaps and bounds as we continued to anticipate what we viewed as the biggest trip we would ever take in our entire lives.

I bought colorful Israel travel books and pored over them from cover to cover. Everything about the country and the people living in it was so unique, captivating, and incredibly foreign to my mind; whether it was the strange money, the unfamiliar language, the rich biblical history, the fascinating culture, or the vastly varying landscapes which seemed to be teeming with biblically relevant archaeological sites. I had become entirely hooked on the idea of personally experiencing all Israel had to offer and I had grown extraordinarily excited to see how such an experience would change me and strengthen my faith. It felt as though we were facing

some sort of real-life Indiana Jones adventure and I could barely contain my increasing enthusiasm.

After our researching days finally dwindled down to a trickle and we felt we had sufficient information on everything we wanted to know, we began planning what to wear and how to pack for a two-week Israeli Bible study tour. The whole endeavor was significantly different than planning our annual vacations to Mexican beach towns. We were used to casually throwing sunscreen, swimwear, shorts, and tees into a suitcase and dashing down to Ixtapa or Puerto Vallarta for a few weeks of sun-drenched, total relaxation by the ocean. But going to Israel on an intensive two-week Bible study tour entailed much more planning. We were counseled to pack lightly (the tour agency only allowed one checked bag for each traveler weighing no more than 50 pounds, and one carry-on apiece). But at the same time, we were also directed to be sure and cover all bases in terms of cool, cold, wet, dry, warm, and hot climates; outfitting ourselves with appropriate, layered forms of clothing and sturdy shoes comfortable to hike in day in and day out. We would need sun protection and rain protection. We would require hats, umbrellas, sunglasses, a swimsuit, jackets, a Bible, a camera, notebooks, small backpacks, and passport holders to wear our I.D.s and money safely on our person at all times. Binoculars, travel alarm clocks, European electrical outlet adaptors,

wristwatches, and the ability to obtain foreign currency (shekels) were also deemed necessary.

Todd and I both spent a lot of time shopping for various khaki cargo pants and shorts, safari vests with numerous pockets, hiking sandals and sneakers – the whole nine yards. The variety of purchases and unfamiliar clothing additionally fueled our zeal for the adventure looming ahead of us. As the trip approached even closer, the group was given several Bible verses to personally study ahead of time. We were also assigned daily prayers to pray over the last few months leading up to the tour, with respect to asking for God’s protection over the traveling experience itself, the health and unity of the group, the safety and spiritual growth of the group, and even for blessings upon the tour company and everyone we would come into contact with. It was truly overwhelming, and our excitement was rising exponentially by the day.

Meanwhile, this particular Israel tour was scheduled to take place in mid-November of 2006, and as the spring and summer seasons rolled speedily along, Israel was increasingly experiencing violence from Hezbollah forces in Lebanon during what is now referred to as “The Second Lebanon War” which reached its heights from July 12 – August 14, 2006. Multitudes of scheduled Christian tours to Israel were steadily becoming canceled during this time period and our pastor was monitoring the situation closely. As our small group met periodically, the pastor would

ask if all members were still comfortable going on the trip in light of the turmoil. Each time, we all simply responded with a resounding and emphatic 'yes' – amazingly, none of us felt any trepidation whatsoever. Once again, I have been forced to conclude God Himself gave us all a special peace in our hearts about the trip and because of this we did not feel led to bow out or cancel the tour like so many other churches across the country had already done. I am reminded of the encouraging verse the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6, 7)

Truly, the Israeli people were being bombed, shot at, kidnapped, and several were killed over the course of the entire year leading up to our trip and not a single member of our group was moved to withdraw from the upcoming tour. King David wrote in Psalm 16:8, *“I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved.”* I believe we were all feeling exactly like David during this time. We had set the Lord before us, we knew He was at our right hand, and we were not moved with any kind of fear in the least. There was a Spirit-led unity and peace abiding in each one of us which could not be explained away other than to accept it was divinely given to us by our amazing God.

## Chapter Two

### Departures and Arrivals

The departure date finally arrived. There were only 20 people traveling on this particular trip, including our pastor – so it was truly a perfectly sized group. We would have plenty of room on our tour bus, and the ability to eat at most restaurants without filling the places to capacity. The departure plan was for everyone to meet at the Chicago O’Hare airport and travel together from that point forward. We had already received our packets containing matching luggage tags, name badges, tour rules, travel checklists, hotel information and the two-week travel itinerary. As I bring to mind the emotions and thoughts which coursed through me while we boarded the plane in Chicago, I can safely attest that at no other time in my life have I been so filled with expectant, thrilled, and awed anticipation. These feelings did not leave me the duration of the 14-day tour. I remember feeling like I could hardly sit still, my heart was so continuously jacked up on emotional adrenaline the likes of which I had never experienced before!

We made the 2.5-hour flight to Newark where we had a bit of a layover, and then gathered to board the huge, long-haul plane which would land us in Tel Aviv, Israel about 12 hours later. There was a special security line and an additional security gate which we were required to pass through, specific to our 2<sup>nd</sup> flight

since it was headed directly to Israel. The group was asked several probing questions by two highly-trained security officers and made to pass through an intensive screening process. We finally found ourselves boarding the largest airplane I had ever personally entered; having three sizeable sections of seats with two wide aisles separating them. There was a television screen on the back of every single seat which could track the flight, play movies, or play music for each passenger - something else I had never seen on an airplane before, though I was a seasoned traveler. Needless to say, I was greatly impressed by the whole situation.

Todd and I located our seats and settled in, grinning at each other from ear to ear. We were then handed airline menus pertaining to the two meals and snacks which were to be served during the lengthy flight. Listed among the usual chicken, beef, fish, and vegetarian offerings was an option called 'Kosher', necessary due to the large number of Jewish or Israeli passengers who regularly make such a flight as this one; be it for business, family reasons, or pleasure. Again, I was enthralled with the blessing of being exposed to such an interesting and different culture - a culture so intricately woven into my own faith by its biblical foundations. I remember sitting in my seat and watching the rest of the passengers board, quietly fascinated by the seemingly vast number of clearly identifiable Jewish people entering the plane. Some men simply wore a yarmulke on top of their heads

while others were very orthodox; dressed in formal black and white clothing with distinct curls spilling from their sideburn areas, strings dangling from their beltlines, and large black hats carried in hand. Some ladies wore scarves over their hair and modest dress. We had not yet left American soil and already I felt as though I was a stranger in a foreign land! With my interest levels running so deep, I had to try very hard not to accidentally stare at anyone too long as the plane filled up with its unique passengers. After filling out our menu choices and trying to get as comfortable as possible for the lengthiest flight we had ever been on, we both prayed for God's protection and safe travels, and then attempted to find sleep, as it was very late into the night by the time the plane took off.

The flight was incredibly long. No other words can more fittingly or more accurately describe it. There is literally no sitting or lying down position one can contrive in an airline coach seat which yields any durable level of comfort or relaxation as the hours slowly pile one onto another during a long-haul flight such as this. I. Did. Not. Sleep. I simply changed positions often, and flip-flopped around like a fish out of water in ever-increasing discomfort over that particular 12-hour period of my life. Physically, mentally, and emotionally, I was just too adrenaline-ridden to relax properly, and airplane seats do not fit me correctly to begin with – the head rest seems to always push my head painfully forward regardless of how far back I can tilt the chair. It is during times like

these that I greatly envy my husband Todd's ability to sleep just about anywhere. I found myself feeling profoundly grateful that at least he was getting some rest. Meanwhile, fidgeting miserably in my assigned space, I waited upon the hands of time and learned a deeply valuable lesson about endurance. My heart was virtually overflowing with feelings of expectation and impatience while the rest of me had zero ability to focus on any one thing that could possibly help pass the hours. I was not interested in the available movies, and I even found it difficult to concentrate on reading the Bible. The only real distractions were the periodic meal and snack services, which, as we continually changed time zones, were not really served at the intervals in which my body wanted them to be served. Truth be told, I was well on my way to experiencing the initial onset and confusion of jetlag for the first time in my life. Regardless, I remained steadfastly excited and filled with anticipation for all the experiences which would lie ahead on this amazing journey. I did my best to spend some time in prayer for the group and for our tour as I tenaciously scrutinized the ongoing flight path monotonously projecting from the dimly lit screen in front of me.

Finally, our plane safely landed at the David Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel. It was at this airport we met our assigned Israeli guide, Zev, a longtime friend of our pastor. He greeted us by saying "Shalom!" which to my understanding is a common Hebrew greeting translating as "God's peace

be with you". He spoke fluent English with a wonderful Israeli accent and had our group through the otherwise tedious immigration and customs process in no time. We were then loaded onto a surprisingly comfortable tour bus and headed to our first hotel, which sat on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the city of Tel Aviv. Being 8 hours ahead of Wisconsin, it was already nightfall in Israel. We were told our hotel was graciously holding their dinner buffet open late, specifically for our group, so when we entered the hotel, we were rushed into the dining area to eat immediately, even before we were handed our room keys for the night.

As we shuffled tiredly into the hotel dining room, disheveled and travel-worn, we were all stopped somewhat abruptly in astonishment. You see, before us was a spread that appeared to be a feast fit for a king. All kinds of delicious looking foods were arrayed beautifully upon a center buffet stand, like an island of deliciousness. This four-sided buffet counter was surrounded by numerous dining tables scattered about in the large, yet cozy-feeling, red-carpeted room. My eyes had never seen a more colorful, lush, fresh, and abundant buffet – how could they have presented such a wonderful dinner at this late hour?? We have since learned it is merely the way of all hotels in Israel. Guests –especially those arriving in large groups – typically have their evening and morning meals pre-billed into the price of their tours and therefore, the hotels offer a vast variety of lavish provisions, buffet-

style, for everyone staying in the hotel during those two mealtimes. Buses full of tourists unload in the evenings and fill the dining rooms. Groups are usually given a scheduled time in which to arrive at their tables, in order for the hotel to handle the flow of dining guests in a reasonable manner. Before boarding their buses and leaving for the day's sites and excursions, those same groups will quickly indulge in a delicious breakfast buffet of the same nature.

This first night, we all filled our stomachs to the best of our abilities and then, being somewhat disoriented and fatigued, we headed straight up to our rooms, each of us desperately desiring some quality time lying horizontally in a real bed. Since it was dark, the view from our room was not to be seen until sunrise. We were grateful to simply take a long, hot shower and crawl under the blankets. Todd and I were both more than willing to wait until morning to take in the exterior surroundings. Todd immediately dozed off into a restful sleep as he so easily does. I, of course, struggled and tossed around for a bit. Finally, I slept.

My eyes opened. I had awakened somewhat abruptly. It was not yet morning in Israel. The travel clock glared unforgivingly, digitally reflecting a brightly lit "3:45 AM" into my sleepy brain. I looked over at Todd, who was groggily stirring as well. Our bodies and sleep cycles were clearly confused. We both attempted to doze over the next hour or two but finally got up to do some Bible reading and prepare for the day. As the shadowy light of dawn steadily began

to overtake the night's darkness, we eagerly ventured out onto the balcony to see the view.

Oh, what a view it was! It was not going to be a sunny day, but this did nothing to dispel the beauty of the sprawling shoreline encompassing our vista. There was a foggy mist hovering in the air and the Mediterranean Sea spread out hazily and peacefully before us, a muted gray-blue body of water softly lapping the shore in small waves. The beach was a lovely, tranquil blanket of pale sand upon which a smattering of early risers could be seen jogging, bicycling, or walking. Though we were in the middle of a large city there was a gentle quietness all around us. As we stood gazing out at a sea we had only read about and were now seeing in person, I inhaled deeply, and enjoyed the faintly salt-tinged air. Everything seemed so fresh and full of adventure!

I felt as though God was smiling down on us as we readied ourselves for our first big day of the tour. We contemplated the surreal feelings we were both experiencing; of being in Israel, of looking out over the Mediterranean Sea, of the fact that we were an ocean's distance away from our home... and found we could not honestly wrap our minds around any of these things as well as we wanted to. Turning hesitantly away from the stunning balcony views, we prepared to meet up with our group in the hotel dining room.

Breakfast was just as impressive as the dinner buffet the night before. The dining host greeted us

with the words, “Boker Tov” which we soon learned was the Hebrew manner of saying “Good Morning”. We cheerfully responded in kind, gave him our room number, and then made our way to the assigned dining area for our church where we sat as a group chatting with one another while enjoying coffee and a variety of eggs, fish, cheeses, fresh yogurts, fruits, breads, and salads. We quickly learned there are two different types of meals which the Jewish people eat; a meat meal and a dairy meal, and they never mix the two – it is part of their Kosher custom. Therefore, if a restaurant is serving meat at a meal, there will be no cheeses or milk products available with the meal; and if a restaurant is serving a dairy meal, then no meat will be offered; only fish, cheese, and milk items. Vegetables and fruit are served at both meals. Additionally, there are no pork products to be found at all in most Jewish restaurants in Israel.

It certainly can be an adjustment for some Americans to learn to eat eggs at breakfast with a side of smoked salmon or a tuna salad mixed with olives, instead of with bacon or ham, but Todd and I happily resolved to embrace the food offered and the cultural elements it reflected. As we wrapped up the breakfast hour, we were instructed to bring our luggage out to the bus to be loaded because we were not returning to this hotel. Rain began lightly drizzling down the windows of the bus as we boarded, and soon our group was officially on its way. The pastor began the morning’s drive by reading a Psalm over the bus

speaker system and praying for God's blessings on the day. The Israeli guide passed out maps, hats, and shoulder bags, printed with the tour company logo. He also filled us in on the day's scheduled sites. As the bus motored along the highway, we were periodically instructed to look this way and that in order to see various landmarks and places which the guide pointed out. The bus seemed to be following the Mediterranean seashore northward and our first stop was to be the ruins of Caesarea. We were all visibly brimming with anticipation.



Mediterranean Sea – Tel Aviv Beach

## Chapter Three

### Great Beginnings

Caesarea Maritima. What can one say about walking the grounds of their first biblical site in Israel? What words can possibly express the overwhelming feelings and thoughts brought about by the reality of a personal, hands-on, physical witness to the biblical ruins, artifacts, and records which are able to make manifest what was previously only viewable as black ink words on an ivory page? Truly in Israel, the Word of God becomes very much alive. Pages of Scripture are the written testimony to viewable, tangible data. Faith grows sure-footed and foundationally solidified by the historically accurate archeological evidence so easily seen, touched, and encountered in this amazing land of promise. This is God's land. These are God's chosen people; chosen as His servants to practice and faithfully keep a record of His truths and precepts; chosen to make Him known to the rest of the world. There is something sacred about being in this country which cannot be explained. It is an experience which must be observed firsthand. I would never advocate a person should have to physically go somewhere to 'get closer to God' yet I am forced to freely admit, in Israel, I felt His presence strongly and the distant echoes of biblical history reverberated upon my spirit in an almost palpable way the duration of the entire tour.

King Herod had built what historians call a 'summer palace' in Caesarea on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and it is well-recorded this palace was a place he would visit often. One can see why, as eyes and ears take in the seemingly endless expanse of the gorgeous blue sea, the soothing resonance of waves spilling endlessly upon the pebble-strewn beach, and the gentle caress of sea breezes drifting merrily about. At this site, our group was first ushered into a building with a small room having a movie screen, and we were shown a short video of the history of Caesarea – which was actually quite fascinating. Afterward, we walked among the ruins, touring the massive ancient site with awe and wonder as we were inundated with the remnants of various buildings, a palace pool, a garden site, an amphitheater, a horse and chariot racing arena known as a hippodrome, and fragments of long-forgotten marketplaces displaying carved pillars, portions of mosaic tile floors, and ornate blocks. Even sarcophagus pieces (ancient stone boxes in which the dead were placed) were on display for tourists to examine.

The amazement we each felt stemmed directly from the knowledge that the Bible mentions this location several times, and though it is thousands of years old, the ruins are simply still existent; open and available for anyone to touch, view, research, explore and capture forever in their hearts. We were seeing in real life a place in which several biblical events transpired and where a multitude of biblical figures

actually walked, talked, and lived. It was a mind-numbing and again, incredibly *surreal* experience to say the least - both mentally and emotionally difficult to digest. I was particularly fascinated by the vestiges of beautiful and intricate mosaic floors scattered about in what appeared to be the ruins of small homes or shops; looking as though someone should repair them and begin living amongst the beautifully colored tiles once again. A crowning item found at this particular site is a monument engraved with the name, "Pontius Pilate"; an archaeological piece of evidence having great importance because until it was found, certain critics of the Bible were able to freely bandy about the idea there was no such person as Pontius Pilate, because there were no artifacts or physical records of his name in existence. Suffice it to say, it is an argument and criticism no longer in circulation!

Our group eventually sat down in the great amphitheater (which is partially rebuilt for safety and public use). We sang worship songs and listened to a Bible teaching relevant to the site. One of the group members had brought his guitar so we were able to enjoy singing songs of praise and worship at many sites during the tour. There is nothing quite like a simple guitar and a small group of believers singing songs to God out in the open air before all of His creation. A Spirit of unity and power prevails in such an activity, and I noticed throughout the two-week pilgrimage no one ever tried to stop us from singing nor did anyone prevent us from the Bible studies we

held at these public sites, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof. Quite often, other Christian groups would be gathered nearby singing and studying just like us. It was a beautiful thing which I have only ever experienced while sojourning in this special land called Israel.

The Bible passages which we studied at Caesarea can be found in the book of Acts, Chapters 23-26. Our pastor focused specifically upon the period in which the apostle Paul was sent to Caesarea by a Roman commander, and as such, Paul was able to give his spiritual testimony before King Agrippa in this very place. Now, whenever I read through this account in my Bible, I have a clear picture in my mind of exactly where it took place. My perception of the event has forever been transformed. To this day, I still can hardly believe I was given the blessing of exploring, singing, and studying in the same location that Paul and King Agrippa would have walked and talked. The following sections of Scripture demonstrate what we studied while at Caesarea:

*And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him." (Acts 25:13-15)*

*Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and*

*answered for himself: "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore, I beg you to hear me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?"*

*Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

*While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' So I said, 'Who*

*are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’*

*“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. For these reasons, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. Therefore, having obtained help from God to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come – that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”*

*Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!” But, he said, “I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.” Then,*

*Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." (Acts 26:1-28)*



Ruins of Caesarea Maritima



## Chapter Four

### Heading North

After a rest room break and taking a few minutes to grab a piping hot cappuccino in the gift shop at Caesarea, we boarded the bus and continued northward, making a quick stop along the seashore to view an existing Roman Aqueduct which gracefully spreads its stone arches across the beach. This structure can be followed inland for approximately 6 or 7 miles, having been built to provide a channel of fresh water from the springs of Shummi to the port city of Caesarea. It is a magnificent archaeological remnant and fascinating to behold – to my mind it was more akin to a work of art than an engineering feat. Our group admired the beauty and enormity of the arches; taking several pictures before being herded back on the bus for a ride to the next site.

As the bus traveled along the highway, the morning haziness of light cloud cover and fog became a drizzle, and then shifted to a steadier rainfall. I felt a bit sleepy and fuzzy-headed, but continued to peer out the rain-streaked window so as not to miss a single sight. Our guide chatted informatively about places of interest as we passed them. At one point he suddenly told us to get our cameras ready and pay close attention to the side of the road up ahead. We were about to pass some carved openings in the earth, in front of which were chiseled stone tracks created for

round wheel-shaped stones to be placed. The guide told us these were remnants of ancient Israeli graves or tombs, such as what Jesus would have been buried in. I grabbed my camera and focused on the side of the road. Sure enough, there they were! Three small caves, one with a stone wheel lying partially in front of it, approached our line of vision. The bus slowed down as much as was reasonable and possible on the highway, and we all clicked our cameras as many times as we could in desperate attempts to capture the scene through our water-streaming windows. I still have this picture. It is not the best quality, but that moment was the only time I have ever successfully captured a photo of those roadside tombs and therefore, I treasure it.



The archaeological remains of Megiddo were on the docket for our next stop. Scripture states that King Solomon built this city. *And this is the reason for the labor force which King Solomon raised: to build the house of the LORD, his own house, the Millo, the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. (1 Kings 9:15)* Our group grabbed umbrellas to fend off the rain showers and stepped off the bus. We first entered a building where we were shown a large model of the city of Megiddo, and we also viewed several artifacts and pieces of information about the site. Then we were led to a small room to watch a 10-minute video highlighting the history of the place. Afterward, we followed an outdoor path which led us all around the ruins and upward to a lookout point and more ruins. From this elevation we were able to take in a vast view of the Jezreel Valley below. This valley is also known as the valley of Megiddo, with the Tel or Hill of Megiddo rising above it being known as "Har Megiddo". It is from this particular Hebrew title that we get the word "Armageddon" which is mentioned in the last book of the Bible; the Book of Revelation. Scripture states this location is where a final war between good and evil will finally take place.

Megiddo was a very substantial city in its time, and the site included the uncovered remains of King Solomon's numerous horse stalls, stone mangers, a grain storage silo, and the like. We were also shown a steep tunnel carved into the earth which gave the

walled city hidden access to a spring of water, especially useful in times of siege and war.

Again, it was mind-blowing to us that we were able to visit, touch and see the archeological remnants and location of such a prominent city from biblical times. We wandered about, exploring, and taking pictures as the guide pointed out various ruins and explained what they were. Depending on how tight the schedule, there is often an opportunity for groups to be led down into this tunnel via an exceptionally long staircase and view where the springs of water were located, as part of the tour experience. If taken, the group eventually comes out at the bottom of the hill where their bus can be found awaiting them. On this particular trip we did not have time to take the underground portion of the tour, but Todd and I have since done so several times on other trips. Walking the tunnel is a much more involved and rather exciting way to see exactly how people of ancient times accessed and protected their water source. However, going through the tunnel experience requires one to be stable on their feet, having the physical capacity to withstand climbing down a steep staircase of 187 steps, and another 77 steps upward on the far end of the tunnel. Some tourists are incapable of such rigorous activity and in these instances, they are able to simply ride the bus with the bus driver and meet up with the rest of the group when they exit the park.

There was a nice gift shop and an area for eating on the grounds of the Megiddo site which tourist

groups invariably utilize. We did some shopping and bought a few books, tees, pottery, and jewelry. On this trip, we did not eat a meal at Megiddo, but future tours gave us the opportunity to enjoy several lunches in the lovely cafeteria while visiting the site. Speaking of lunch, by this time, we were all officially quite hungry. Leaving Megiddo, the bus made its way to a quaint looking restaurant located just off the side of the road. Our guide informed us this initial lunch was to be an authentic Israeli falafel, and we were asked to get our money ready because lunches for the most part were not included in the tour price. At first, I actually thought the restaurant building looked somewhat like a gas station, but as we pulled up closer I realized there were beautiful flowers planted around the front of the building, and several picnic tables with welcoming, checkered tablecloths stood cheerfully inside a shaded, open-air patio near the entrance.

We filed inside through the front door where we found several more long tables and a counter behind which stood employees preparing and serving food as customers walked up to them. Because I had incessantly researched the food of Israel in preparing for the trip, we already knew what a falafel was and both Todd and I were extremely excited to try one. An Israeli falafel is an herb-seasoned mixture of mashed chickpeas which are rolled into balls, breaded, deep-fried, and loaded into freshly baked pita bread. From there, it is piled high with assorted relishes, vegetables, and sauces such as tahini, garlic or spicy sauce, or

hummus. This may not sound like 'normal food' to the average American, but I can assure you, after a long morning of hiking archaeological sites along with singing and Bible studies, the jet-lagged tourist is a hungry one indeed, and these falafels smelled amazing!

We were given trays just as school children are given in cafeteria lunch lines, and then each of us were handed a soft pita with 3 warm, large falafel balls lodged inside. We rounded a buffet island standing in the middle of the room which was filled with a variety of brightly colored vegetables, olives, salad mixtures, sauces, and relishes to top off our 'sandwiches'. Finally, choosing a drink (water, soda, or juice) from the cooler at the end of the line we completed our purchase at the cash register. Sitting down in various groups according to table size, we all bowed our heads as the pastor prayed and thanked God for our food. Finally, we proceeded to happily and hungrily wolf down what was to be the first of many falafel lunches on the tour. Most people in the group greatly enjoyed their first falafel eating event, and there was a lot of picture-taking being done to mark the occasion. Our first falafel will always be a fond memory.



With filled bellies and renewed energy, we climbed back on the bus and our bus driver began traveling toward the next stop, steadily making our way up a winding road to a place called Mount Carmel. Biblically speaking, Mount Carmel is the location where the prophet Elijah challenged and defeated the prophets of Baal: *Now therefore, send and gather all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table. So, Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel. And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word. Then Elijah said to the*

*people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God". So, all the people answered and said, "It is well spoken." (1 Kings 18:19-24)*

Mount Carmel boasts a beautiful view of both the Mediterranean Sea in one direction and the Jezreel Valley in the other. Currently, a Catholic religious order known as the "Carmelites" resides on the mountaintop and it is their grounds, gardens, building, and restrooms which tourists occupy upon visiting. Our group found a private garden in which to gather, sing, pray, and listen to the Bible study. We sang a worship song and our pastor taught on the above passages, continuing on with the account of how the prophets of Baal could not get their god to answer them, whereas God responded to Elijah's prayer powerfully and immediately. Scripture then goes on to describe how the people bowed down and worshipped God, the prophets of Baal were executed, and then God finally allowed rain to come upon the drought-stricken land. It was a great study, with Elijah modeling for us a wonderful example of faithfulness, obedience, and complete submission to God and the power of prayer. After the study, we walked the picturesque grounds, and climbed an outdoor staircase which led to a

rooftop terrace. From this vantage point, we had 360-degree views of the land, from the sea to the valley. Our guide pointed out various landmarks of import throughout the landscape (which had become remarkably sunny while we ate our lunch). As had quickly become our habit, we took as many photos as possible.

### View from Mount Carmel



Eventually, we made our way down to the restrooms, which required a shekel's donation to use, and returned to our new traveling home, the bus. The coach chugged steadily along the highway for quite a while, heading toward a location overlooking the city of Nazareth, known as Mount Precipice. By now, the sky was showing signs of fading into evening, as if it

were growing tired of the day, and the air had noticeably become cooler. We approached Nazareth, the biblically notorious home of Joseph and Mary, and the lumbering bus slowly circled up a steep hillside which eventually brought us to a scenic overlook towering above the city. We were advised to grab jackets or sweatshirts to keep warm at this site. I noticed the ground was incredibly rocky, with countless stones strewn about the landscape. All sorts of shapes and sizes jutted forth from the earth in jagged and abrupt forms. A long walking path meandered upward toward the very top peak. Our group got off the bus and began making its way along the path. As we somewhat wearily climbed, the winds noticeably increased, and the temperature steadily dropped. Once the summit was reached we were able to enjoy a beautiful although quickly dimming view of Nazareth as the late afternoon light began to wane and evening dusk threatened to slowly descend upon the mountain. The Bible study typically done on this location is that of Luke 4:16-30, in which an interesting incident takes place. Essentially, the people of Nazareth become so enraged at Jesus and His words, they lead him up the 'hill on which their city was built' in a failed attempt to throw Him over the edge. The passage reads as follows:

*So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit*

*of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" He said to them, "You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.' Then He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way. (Luke 4:16-30)*

Thoroughly chilled by the brisk winds and darkening sky on Mount Precipice, the group made its way back to the bus as quickly as possible and we began the half hour drive toward Tiberias, a city settled

upon the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We were scheduled to lodge there the next 3 nights. Most American tourists are feeling quite jetlagged by this point on their first day. We were no exception. As the coach rumbled faithfully along the highway, many in the group were lulled to sleep. We passed by a city called Cana without stopping, but the guide pointed it out and our pastor reminded those of us who were still awake this was the village in which Jesus performed His first miracle at the beginning of His ministry. The event can be found in the book of John and reads as follows:

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine*

*until now!" This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him. (John 2:1-11)*

Todd and I tried to see what we could of Cana as we sped through the tiny village, but aside from a few shops, gas stations, houses, and restaurants we did not notice anything of significance. It was also becoming too dim to view anything clearly, so we sat back in our seats and relaxed, silently anticipating our arrival in Tiberias while pondering what unique adventures awaited us there.

## Chapter Five

### Tiberias

The bus finally rounded a large bend in the road and suddenly in front of us sat a city on a sloping hill, with its welcoming lights twinkling and sparkling in the distance. Everyone who had been napping began stirring and peering out their windows, eager to arrive in another new and exciting place.

Oh, Tiberias! It is the holy city of the scribes; a quaint, cultural delight set on the western edge of the Galilee. Tiberias boasts a picturesque hillside steeply rising behind antiquated buildings of blackened basalt stone. The sea spreads out gracefully before prosperous boat docks and a lively, Galilean lakefront boardwalk. Through the course of its week, Tiberias is an energetic hub of food and tourist activity; restaurants, shops, fishing and boat tours, open air markets and music, are offered in abundance for such a small population. But come Sabbath day, all is quiet. Most businesses remain somberly closed as the majority of Tiberias' local residents observe their weekly religious obligations at home and in the synagogues. Tourists must find other ways to spend their free time during this sacred day of the week, having limited hotel restaurant provisions and very few places open for visiting or shopping. Arriving in the city after dark, it was difficult for the group to see any sights or even locate the water. The city lights did

make it possible for us to note Tiberias was definitely situated upon a hill, with a mass of black void to one side as we approached, giving us a clue as to where the sea lay. We were told our hotel was located relatively close to the shore, with many of its rooms overlooking the Sea of Galilee. But it was so dark we could not appreciate the view. So, we stood rather tiredly on the pavement outside the bus and waited for our luggage to be unloaded as the pastor and guide went inside to check in and retrieve the room keys for our small group.

When we finally entered the hotel lobby, suitcases in tow, we were greeted with refreshing glasses of chilled lemon water. The hotel concierge was very welcoming and informed us about the various aspects of our stay, including dinner and breakfast times and locations, as well as the options available for certain spa services and other extracurricular activities with which we may have an interest. I will honestly admit neither Todd nor myself have much memory of the rest of the evening. I do know we missed our first dinner in Tiberias. After locating our room and getting settled in, we both fell asleep on the bed immediately, and sadly, did not awaken until sunrise the next morning. Such is the way of jetlag.

However, sunrise over the Sea of Galilee is the worthy reward for the jetlagged tourist. Because of the 8-hour time difference between the United States and Israel, it is typical for most Americans to awaken

around 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning for at least the first half of a two-week Israel Bible tour. The silver lining in this cloud is the wonderful blessing of often being awake as the sun rises. The feelings incited by standing in the crisp morning air on a hotel balcony in Tiberias, as the beginning glow of dawn slowly colors the horizon, cannot sufficiently be described by this unworthy author. I can only assert a Galilean sunrise is something every Bible believing child of God should seek to experience at least once. The first daylight view of the Sea of Galilee is one of fresh beauty. This day, the waters were lightly rippling and starting to sparkle as the earliest rays of morning sun began to dapple across its myriad small waves. Birds soared overhead. Docked boats bobbed lazily up and down the long, boardwalk expanse which was in front of the hotel grounds. The city was not yet awake for the most part, so a peacefulness hung in the air as we looked out over the sea from our hotel room perch. The emotions which coursed through my heart knowing I was personally gazing upon the very body of water which Jesus and His apostles had sailed were so strong I can still recall feeling small sobs surging up from my chest as quiet tears welled in my eyes. Who could have thought I would be able to be in this place? It was beyond incredible. To say our spirits were overwhelmed by such an experience is a tragic understatement. I will remain forever grateful for such an amazing blessing.

Future Bible study trips to Israel would entail staying at a variety of different hotels. Most were situated within blocks of one another in Tiberias. However, on the trip we took in 2013, which included one of my daughters, we had the remarkable experience of staying at a unique resort outside the city of Tiberias. Formerly an Israeli kibbutz, (a kibbutz is a communal living arrangement necessitated by the return of the Jewish people to Israel, in which everyone worked together and lived together in order to create a new life and farm the land) the resort was known as Ma'agan, and had lovely gardens and parklike grounds stretching across a great expanse of the Galilean shoreline. The rooms in which we stayed were akin to small cottages attached to one another, and our access to the sea was vastly improved compared to the Tiberias hotels because a small beach was on the site. Some of the younger people in our group that year got themselves up before sunrise and went swimming in the Galilee at dawn. What memories they must have made for themselves! While on the kibbutz, we lacked the walkable access to the shops and restaurants of Tiberias to which we were accustomed, but the more rural experience was also quite wonderful, and we deeply appreciated the rare opportunity to stay there.

Meanwhile, our initial morning in downtown Tiberias was once again graced with a beautiful array of Israeli breakfast foods and deliciously rich coffee. We sat at tables enjoying views of the Sea of Galilee

gleaming brightly through the many windows. Our group once again sat together and ate heartily while animatedly chatting with one another about our rooms and who had city views versus who had sea views. We all were excitedly looking forward to a new and adventurous time of sightseeing and Bible studies. Eventually, Todd and I gulped down our last few swallows of coffee and boarded the already cherished tour bus, cheerfully telling our driver “Boker Tov” as we passed by him and found seats in which to sit.



Boats docked on the Sea of Galilee, and Breakfast



## Chapter Six

### Capernaum

We found ourselves driving toward the north side of the Galilee and into the village of Capernaum, another biblically relevant town offering ruins to explore. The word 'Capernaum' in Hebrew means 'Village of Nahum' and in this city archeologists have uncovered the remains of two ancient synagogues, one built on top of the other. The older synagogue is constructed of black basalt stone as is much of the entire village. This is the synagogue most scholars believe Jesus would have spent time in during His ministry. It was eventually destroyed, and another synagogue was erected directly on top of it, using the original walls as the foundation. The newer edifice is known locally as 'the white synagogue' because it is made of beautiful white stone not native to the area and which would have been brought in from somewhere else at great expense. Much of the white synagogue still stands and it is quite lovely, displaying many examples of ornately carved Roman architecture, including several beautiful Roman columns or pillars.

Entering the lush, flower-filled grounds, many of us exclaimed excitedly at the plethora of ancient, black basalt stone walls which had been uncovered just enough for tourists to discern the outlines of numerous buildings housing multitudes of rooms, staircases,

arched doorways, columns, and the like. Additionally, there was a substantial amount of carved white stone pieces on display, likely having crumbled or broken off the synagogue building at one point or another. The entire village enjoyed a scenic view of the deep blue Galilean waters, and we truly felt transported in time as we imagined Jesus teaching in the synagogue, performing miracles, and even dwelling in one of the nearby buildings with the apostle Peter and his mother. The group finally sat down upon stone benches inside the synagogue and spent a short time singing. Afterward, we listened to our pastor give a Bible teaching relevant to the site as warm morning sunshine fell upon our shoulders. The following is a small sample of the many Scripture passages in which we are told Jesus spent time in Capernaum:

*And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali. (Matthew 4:13)*

*Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths. (Luke 4:31)*

*Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:21,22)*

*And again, He entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive*

*them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them. (Mark 2:1,2)*

*When the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they also got into boats and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You come here?" (John 6:24,25)*

The group was given some time to wander about and explore the ruins of Capernaum. We eventually meandered back to the path which led us to the bus parking lot, and many of us stopped at the restrooms on site – paying a shekel for the privilege of using the facilities – while some in the group even had time to grab a cup of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice from a cute little fruit stand adorning the side of the walkway. Freshly squeezed pomegranate juice is something I had not tasted prior to the trip and while I found it refreshingly cold and flavorful in the moment, in truth it was rather tart for my palate. The juice is impressively nutritious and loaded with antioxidants, therefore my pastor absolutely cherishes any opportunity to partake of it when in Israel. Needless to say, Todd and I were appreciative of the chance to sample this Israeli specialty despite the sour flavor.

On one future Israel tour, we diverted from the usual stops and spend time at an olive oil factory and store located in Capernaum, called Olea Essence. It is a family-owned company dedicated to planting, growing, and pressing olives, utilizing every bit of their harvest in an effort to be self-sustaining, and

environmentally responsible. This store sold not only olives, olive oil and related food items but also a multitude of skin cleansing and skin care products. We had a wonderful time listening to their presentation, experimenting with their soaps, and tasting their oils. There were numerous sink tubs lined up against one of the walls where visitors were invited to use one of the olive scrubs on their hands and faces to feel how the product cleans and softens skin. Todd, ever the adventurous one, scrubbed his whole head to the delight of our host, creating giggles all around. We purchased the soap and a tin of garlic flavored olive oil while there, and I continue to order their products online to this day. I would highly recommend a stop at Olea Essence to anyone visiting Israel. It truly is a perfect way to personally experience the many uses of Israel's most culturally relevant product; olives.



Basalt stone ruins of Capernaum.





Israeli Fruit Stand

## Chapter Seven

### The Galilee and St. Peter's Fish

Our next stop that particular day was to be a unique museum housing the remains of a Jesus-era fishing boat. The vessel was discovered underneath the Galilean Sea in 1986, during a year when a drought had caused the water level to significantly recede. We entered a rather modern structure which held a large gift shop, coffee and deli area, restrooms, and a closed-off viewing area where groups were brought in restricted numbers to watch a short movie regarding the architectural find. Our guide led us into the movie area and after watching it, we were given some time to gaze upon the boat itself. It was extremely interesting, and seeing the 2000-year-old boat remains was absolutely fascinating. We were impressed with the amazing process which had to be used to salvage the boat from where it was found and keep it from disintegrating as they transported it to the museum for display. Eventually, we left the viewing room and shopped for a while in the well-appointed gift store. Todd and I grabbed a hot cup of delicious Israeli cappuccino and sat at one of the many nearby deli tables as we awaited the rest of the group to finish shopping and making their purchases.

From there, we walked outside, down to the shore of the Galilee onto a large boat dock and waited to board a beautiful, wooden boat which was to take

us out to sea and then to the other side for a fish lunch back in Tiberias. This adventure turned out to be one of my favorite parts of the entire tour. Think of it! We were going to be actually sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee! Once again, I do not feel there are adequate words to describe how I felt and what this experience meant to me. Todd and I were literally going to be floating on the same body of water Jesus and His apostles fished in...it seemed entirely unreal and impossible, yet there we were! We boarded and made ourselves comfortable on the long, varnished benches which adorned the sides of the vessel.

As we pulled away from the dock, the boat captain welcomed our group and asked where we were from. When he learned we were Americans he had his deckhands hoist the American flag next to their Israeli flag. Then he asked us to stand as he began playing our national anthem over the speaker system. It truly was an incredibly unexpected and moving moment. Hands over hearts, we joined in singing our nation's anthem, and upon the song's completion the captain then asked us to remain standing as he played their Israeli anthem. What a beautiful song it was! I had never heard it sung before, but Todd and I were deeply affected by its exquisite melody. It was enough to bring tears to our eyes on this highly emotional trip.

Both songs having ended, the boat then glided along the waters further and further out to sea. We had some quiet, reflective time to deeply breathe in the fresh air while gazing out at the water and

surrounding hills, shores, and villages. Eventually, our guide broke the comfortable silence and began identifying various locations along the shorelines to help us get our bearings. He also informed us the Sea of Galilee is quite deep, measuring 141 feet at its deepest point. We passed a high, grassy green hill with a sharp, steep drop on the side facing the sea and were told it was likely the location of the following event in Luke 8:26-33:

*Then they sailed to the country of the Gadarenes, which is opposite Galilee. And when He stepped out on the land, there met Him a certain man from the city who had demons for a long time. And he wore no clothes, nor did he live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out, fell down before Him, and with a loud voice said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me!" For He had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had often seized him, and he was kept under guard, bound with chains and shackles; and he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the wilderness. Jesus asked him, saying, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion," because many demons had entered him. And they begged Him that He would not command them to go out into the abyss. Now a herd of many swine was feeding there on the mountain. So, they begged Him that He would permit them to enter them. And He permitted them. Then the demons went out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the lake and drowned. (Luke 8:26-33)*

Our worship leader began strumming his guitar and we joined him in singing a few favorite worship songs. Then, someone in the group stood up and gave a personal testimony of how they became a Christian, after which our pastor taught a Bible study. Once again, Todd and I began feeling the effects of our jetlag as we chugged along the water, becoming rather sleepy. Gentle Galilean breezes and the boat's calming engine drone were having a mesmerizing effect upon our messed-up body clocks.

As we neared the opposite shore and the end of our boating adventure, the captain was kind enough to put uplifting Christian music on his speakers and he then brought out a box filled with polished stones taken from the Sea of Galilee. These came with brown leather necklace chains, and he was selling them at \$10 apiece. He also had plastic placemats for sale, depicting maps of the Galilean region, and a few other random mementos and souvenirs. The group crowded around and picked through the lovely little stones, handing him their money as they made their choices. This activity helped perk us up a bit and by the time all sales were completed, we had docked, and it was time to disembark.

I truly was quite sad to be done with this memorable ride but excited to eat lunch nonetheless, as the afternoon was quickly getting away from us. We bid the crewmen farewell and thanked them profusely for the delightful experience.





We walked off the dock and onto a boardwalk which brought us to the doorstep of a waterside restaurant. The staff was expecting us for a late lunch, so we all filed in to use the restrooms and be seated at our allotted table. The servers began bringing out several small tapas-sized dishes filled with various relishes, sauces, and vegetables to the table. They also brought hummus, a plateful of fresh, warm pitas, and water with lemons in pitchers. We were given a choice of ordering “St. Peter’s whole fish”, a fish filet, grilled chicken, or a cheese pizza. Almost everyone chose St. Peter’s fish simply to be able to say they ate fish on the shores of Galilee. Many of us were not really looking forward to having a whole fish, head and tail included, staring up at us from our plates, but Todd and I felt we

had to experience the infamous entree at least one time. We chatted amongst one another, enjoying the warm pita and related fixings while we awaited our fish order. Finally, the servers returned carrying large platters stacked high with grilled whole fish and piping hot French fries. It was a strange and somewhat dizzying feeling to be passing around fresh pita bread and whole fish as we sat at the crowded table overlooking the Sea of Galilee. One cannot help but be vividly reminded of Jesus and the miracle of 5 loaves and 2 fish:

*When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." He said, "Bring them here to Me." Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes. So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14:15-21)*

While I could personally do without the shocked-looking little fish face and crispy tail on my plate, the strong seasonings and grilled flavor of the fish was quite tasty. I successfully ate most of what

would be considered a filet off the body of the fish and left the rest of it alone. We greatly appreciated the salty French fries as a familiar reminder of food at home. Overall, the St. Peter's Fish luncheon event was a uniquely interesting and unforgettable experience for our group. Many amusing photos were taken to preserve the memory, of course. For instance, our pastor attained immense enjoyment from picking up his fish head and making the mouth 'talk' at those of us who would prefer not to see such a thing! Laughter and love had quickly bonded our group into a close-knit family, and we cherished every meal together like this the entire tour.

The bus met us on the street side of the restaurant, and we climbed in for a relatively short drive to the Mount of Beatitudes, another beautiful site with great views, lovely gardens, and secluded areas designed for Bible study. We settled in a quiet alcove where we sang a worship song and our pastor taught from Matthew 5:1-12, concerning the blessings or 'beatitudes' Jesus taught about a little over 2000 years ago, somewhere on this mountain. *And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the*

*peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)*

The pastor then became quite excited about the next and last stop of the day, as he announced to us it was his favorite place in Israel. Mount Arbel reaches up to the heavens, high and sharp-edged, authoritatively commanding a sweeping, panoramic vista of the entire Galilee region. From its peak, one can view the full landscape which encompassed 2/3 of Jesus' ministry. A charming, lone tree stands picturesque against the sky atop Mount Arbel, fantastically silhouetted when the sun descends and sets on the horizon. After the bus trekked up and around a steep road for a while we finally parked. From there we climbed a long, narrow, and rocky path to reach the tree and take in the view of the sea and rolling countryside spread out below us. A multitude of villages, farming fields, forests, valleys, and roadways lay in the distance, surrounding the Galilee on all sides. Once again our 35 mm cameras were out and utilized to the utmost of their abilities. We then had a group photo taken as the sun lowered in the hazy, dusk-tinted distance; a golden ball of fire glowing its last rays until it returns at dawn to shine again. What a perfect finish to a great day! We clambered back down the path, boarded our bus, and

returned to the hotel to indulge in another wonderful dinner buffet and animated conversation with our group members, before retiring to our room, collapsing onto the bed, and closing our eyes in a sweet reprieve from all activity. I prayed we would be able to finally sleep until dawn.

### Atop Mount Arbel



## Chapter Eight

### Tel Dan and Cappuccinos

The next morning found us awake exceedingly early as had become our somewhat frustrating custom. Nevertheless, we groggily showered and began to find the energy to relish the beginning of another glorious new day. Sitting on the small balcony to read our Bibles, our gazes often shifted from black and white pages to the peaceful vista of the Galilean Sea. As the cool morning air began to grow warmer in the steadily increasing sunshine, we readied ourselves for breakfast with our beloved group.

I had gotten into a breakfast routine of eating a hard-boiled egg or scrambled eggs, tuna & olive salad, Israeli salad, a roll or bakery item, fruit, and coffee, as daily morning fare. Yes, I missed bacon as a side to my eggs, but still generally appreciated the variety of other wonderful items offered on the buffets. For me, the salty tuna and olive mixture was a decent replacement for bacon or sausage. Todd, on the other hand, tended to gravitate toward the smoked salmon and fine, sharp cheeses provided on trays next to the fish. He also loved ordering freshly cooked omelets at the omelet stations - something I was not patient enough to stand in line and wait for. I am not a morning person, so these active, very early starts to the day were my biggest challenge on the tour. As a result, the usual breakfast regimen for me included entering the

restaurant and shuffling around to find a hot cup of coffee as quickly as possible. From that point, I would find a place to sit and quietly sip my treasured, steaming beverage for about 20 minutes, in a somewhat trancelike state, until I felt ready to eat. This is the reason why I never had the time or patience to wait in line for a personalized omelet. I was far too busy having a pleasant and much needed 'wake-up session' with my java!

Several times thus far on the trip, Todd and I had noticed an unfamiliar fruit piled in bowls on the buffet tables and finally, after asking around, we discovered it was known as a kumquat. To my eyes, it looked like a mix between a wild apple and a tomato. I found I was not overly fond of it after taking a bite, but Todd rather enjoyed them. He would sometimes grab one for the road (I usually grabbed an apple or a hard-boiled egg) since our lunches often became pushed out far past noontime due to the heavy touring schedule.

We boarded the bus and began heading north of Tiberias and the Galilee region, toward the Golan Heights and the ancient ruins of the City of Dan. We enjoyed glorious morning views of the Sea of Galilee as the bus rambled its merry way along a highway which followed the shoreline for a time. At one juncture we passed a sign indicating a turn leading to the village of Migdal which now stood in place of a more ancient village from the Second Temple period known as Magdala. This location is believed to be the

hometown of Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' most avid followers. We did not stop there during this particular tour, but on a different trip Todd and I were eventually able to visit some notable ruins in Magdala, including a Jewish synagogue from the times of Jesus which archeologists discovered several years after this first tour.

The further north we rode, the chillier it became. We were glad to have fleece jackets in tow as we arrived at the site of Tel Dan. The word 'Tel' in Hebrew means mound or hill. In modern day Israel, a Tel most often will signify a hill containing remnants or ruins of ancient cities buried inside its many layers. Therefore, Tel Dan is a large mound of ancient ruins situated in the northern part of Israel, near Mount Hermon. The Jordan river flows through Tel Dan, with much of its water annually supplied by melting snow from the mountains of Hermon. Our guide informed us the city of Dan contains the oldest uncovered ruins in Israel. Today it is a definitively important tourist site for Bible students and archaeology scholars alike. This site also functions as a beautiful park and nature preserve filled with miles of trails, scenic views of the Jordan, as well as sweeping views of both Lebanon and Syria border lands. We left the bus and hit the restrooms first, then milled about the bustling gift shop as we waited for everyone to gather. Todd and I grabbed a cappuccino from the shopkeeper, thanking him in Hebrew, for by this time we had learned quite a few Hebrew phrases and therefore we used them

every chance we could get. In this instance, the word “Toda” means “Thank you”. We then got ourselves ready for a good, long hike in the woods.

Before I launch into a full description of our Tel Dan visit, I must take a moment to talk about the cappuccino situation in Israel. Yes, it seems a rather random subject to write about, but to be honest, the availability and purchasing of cappuccino in Israel really must be discussed, because it truly becomes an entertaining facet of the tour experience for many church groups! In Israel, a delightful cup of cappuccino appears to be available for purchase in just about every shop one enters. It does not seem to matter whether it is a gift shop, book shop, fresh fruit and veggie market, juice shop, bottled water shop, antique store, deli market, cigar store, pizza place, or hardware store; virtually every shopkeeper has a cappuccino maker behind the counter! Additionally, the coffee routinely seems to be of a surprisingly high quality and therefore, usually quite delectable! I am certain I cannot make it clear how often some of us took the opportunity to hurriedly duck into these establishments whenever possible and quickly acquire for ourselves a bit of this caffeinated heaven. Early mornings, long and rigorous days of activity, and the ever-present jet lag we continually experienced certainly caused the abundant cappuccino availability to be an incredible blessing to many of us! Suffice it to say, we happily found Israeli cappuccino to be a

desirable and uniquely pervasive accoutrement throughout the tour.

Our hike through the ancient city of Dan started with the group walking down a path which appeared to be leading toward the sound of rushing water. Sure enough, immediately upon entering a densely wooded area we found ourselves face to face with the rushing rapids of the Jordan River as we stood on a conveniently placed wooden bridge along the walkway. This was yet another one of those surreal moments in which none of us had quite expected or really given much thought to being able to see or touch the infamous river so predominantly mentioned throughout Scripture.

### The Jordan River



The Jordan rapidly surged along its course right in front of us, and at certain locations along the path we were able to stoop down and touch the water, every one of us pondering the enormity of being able to do such a thing. This river is mentioned almost 200 times in the Bible. It has been camped alongside of, crossed over, used to demarcate boundaries, baptized in, and washed or bathed in by multitudes of people throughout Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. As I attempted to wrap my mind around these thoughts, the account of Naaman and the prophet Elisha was brought sharply into focus.

*Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but a leper. And the Syrians had gone out on raids and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. Then she said to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy." And Naaman went in and told his master, saying, "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel." Then the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he departed and took with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. Then he brought the letter to the king of Israel, which said, 'Now be advised, when this letter comes to you, that I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may heal him of his leprosy'. And it happened, when the king of Israel read the letter, that he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and make alive, that*

*this man sends a man to me to heal him of his leprosy? Therefore, please consider, and see how he seeks a quarrel with me."*

*So it was, when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Please let him come to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." Then Naaman went with his horses and chariot, and he stood at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean."*

*But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, "Indeed, I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.' Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. And his servants came near and spoke to him, and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. And he returned to the man of God, he and all his aides, and came and stood before him; and he said, "Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel." (2 Kings 5:1-15)*

This 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings passage is merely one of many historical accounts in the Bible which focus upon the Jordan River, but it is one which has always stuck with me. The event is an excellent picture of how God's ways are higher than the ways of man, and we do not always need to understand or agree with God's instructions, we must simply obey Him in faith. Naaman's healing occurred when he finally obeyed the prophet Elisha's God-given instructions even though he did not like them and outright disagreed with the reasonability of the command. At various times in our own lives, we will find God exhorting or prompting us to do something which we do not necessarily understand, or perhaps leading us in a way we may initially find ourselves kicking against. But, if we humbly submit ourselves in faith to His Spirit and to His gentle nudging, we will most certainly find ourselves blessed in the end.

We hiked further and further along the beautiful trail, simply absorbing the beauty of nature in this location, and as we did so, several of us began to notice olive trees. The leaves of olive trees have an interesting, silvery gray hue, so the tree becomes quite easy to distinguish from other trees, even for newbies like us. Olives play such an integral role in the culture and meals of Israel. And as previously mentioned, olives are also a major industry for the nation. Since Wisconsin is far too cold to grow anything so wonderful as olives, I was especially taken with the olive trees in Israel and the variety of interesting ways

in which olives were prepared and served at restaurants and hotel buffets. Some are presented covered in spicy sauces or herbed oils; others are served straight from jars – all are locally grown, brined, and purchased. We found olives in many of the salads, breads, and relishes on the buffets, and even found them cooked within certain meat and gravy entrees. Suffice it to say Todd and I took great pleasure in exploring the diverse ways to eat olives while we sojourned in Israel, and since that trip, have increased our intake of them at home as well!

### Olive Tree



The ruins of Dan are extensive and scattered widely throughout the densely wooded park. Old, crumbling walls rose up to meet us around a bend in the path and the outlines of various structures splayed out in all directions. We climbed up, we climbed

down, we carefully scurried across wet stones and running streams of water. Finally, we reached an open meadow with many ruins protruding from the ground and in the center of this area was a modern, square, metal structure erected to portray where an altar had originally stood in ancient times. The remains of antiquated stone steps leading to a high, stone sacrificial platform could be seen as well. This altar is mentioned in the Bible, and it had been built to hold a carved image; a golden calf, which the tribe of Dan worshipped in idolatry, instead of worshipping the one true God.

*And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel. However, the name of the city formerly was Laish. Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. (Judges 19:29,30)*

*However, Jehu did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin, that is, from the golden calves that were at Bethel and Dan. (2 Kings 10:29)*

By the time we reached the place where our pastor wanted to conduct a Bible study several of us had become a tad overheated with our hiking endeavors, despite the cooler air. We sat down on a set of somewhat crumbling steps under the welcoming shade of a lovely oak tree, folding our sweatshirts and jackets underneath us as a cushion against the cold

stone. As was the case at most sites, someone in the group stood up and gave a personal testimony with regard to how they became a Christian. Then we sang worship songs and our pastor taught about the idol worship which had taken place in the city of Dan. It was a wonderful way to spend a morning – a lengthy hike, fresh air, beautiful surroundings, and the addition of yet more biblical locations which we will forever picture differently in our minds due to having been physically on the actual sites of both the city of Dan and the Jordan River. We eventually arose from our study and continued to stroll along the trail. As we crested a hill, we found ourselves gazing upon the distant rolling fields and mountainous slopes of both Lebanon and Syria. We hunkered down single file and walked carefully through some decaying, sunken bunkers formerly used by Israeli soldiers in past battles and skirmishes, and we could also see a rusty war tank in one of the distant fields. We were remarkably close to the borders, indeed!



Golden calf altar site, Tel Dan



## Chapter Nine

### Caesarea Philippi, and Nimrod's Fortress

Upon completing the Tel Dan tour, we met up with our bus after using the restroom facilities and drove to the next location of interest which was relatively nearby; Caesarea Philippi and the cave of 'Pan' or 'Banias'. Pulling into the grounds of Caesarea Philippi the first thing one notices is the gaping mouth of a large cave situated not far from the top of a steep cliff in the background. At the base of the cliff were numerous stone walled Bible study areas for groups, and meandering through the entire park was a wide, shallow stream bed trickling lazily along. The water shimmered clean and clear in the sunlight, with colorful stones and pebbles lying at the bottom, easily seen. A small gift shop and restroom area were also on the site. We gathered for another personal testimony, singing, and Bible study in one of the convenient alcoves. Our pastor directed us to open our Bibles to Matthew 16:13 to begin our study.

*When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So, they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not*

*revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:13-18)*

Caesarea Philippi is located at the base of Mount Hermon. In those times the area was a haven of pagan idol worship. The infamous, yawning cave mouth which was stationed a little further than halfway up the mountainside had formerly been flowing with vast amounts of rushing water originating from one of the largest springs which feeds into the Jordan River. Many people thought the intimidating cave and its unruly waters were an opening to the gates of hell or ‘Hades’. Numerous pagan temples were constructed in the area, but this particular location was primarily known for the worship of the Greek god, Pan; a half-man, half-goat deity. Sacrifices were thrown into the roiling, spring-fed waters of the cave and if they were pulled down and did not reappear, it was thought the sacrifice was accepted; but if the body popped back up, the sacrifice was deemed rejected.

We were told many unmentionable and extremely immoral sexual acts were performed here as part of the pagan worship rituals. Culturally, the Jewish people would have looked upon Caesarea Philippi with abhorrence and steered clear of the area at all costs in those times. Yet, we see from the aforementioned Bible passages Jesus purposefully brought His disciples near this location in order to

make a teaching point. “Who do men say that I AM?” He asks. Jesus asked the question because there were so many false worship systems competing with the worship of the one true God – the Creator of heaven and earth, and His Son, the promised Messiah. The ruling Caesar at the time was a man actually demanding to be worshipped as a god, and here at Caesarea Philippi was a godlike goat entity demanding to be worshipped as half man, half god. Conversely, Jesus Christ is 100% God and 100% man at the same time – the only God worthy of our worship, and the only sinless Man worthy of being the one sacrifice eternally acceptable to God for all human rebellion – which in essence, is our innate nature of being born into this fallen world wired to live life without God leading us, and instead, living under our own rule and primarily for our own self-focused desires. Upon referring to the gates of ‘Hades’ or hell in the prior passages, Jesus was likely pointing out the cave to His disciples in that moment. His purpose was to make it clear to them nothing can prevail over God’s Word, God’s promises, and God’s gift of salvation and eternal life through Himself, the Son of the Living God – not even the gates of hell.

## Caesarea Philippi – ‘Gates of Hell’



It is quite a thing to more fully comprehend this passage and realize what Caesarea Philippi was all about in former times. Knowing more details about the culture, locations, influences, and religious practices of the people who existed during the days in which Scripture was written can be extremely enlightening and revealing to our understanding of God's Word. After the Bible study was finished, we were given time to climb up to the cave and admire the numerous archeological relics which could be found on display throughout the grounds of the park. There were pieces of pillars, cornices, and carved items of unknown purpose; all were very ornate and somewhat incredible to behold as we tried to imagine what buildings or statues they used to adorn.

The group was once again hungry for a lunch break, so we boarded the bus and headed to a nearby restaurant which was part of a former Israeli kibbutz. What a feast of a lunch we had that day! We were told this particular restaurant was known throughout Israel as having one of the best, most diverse, and tastiest array of buffet food for tourists. I remember gobbling down a vast amount of an amazing soup – some wonderful golden concoction which I could not identify and to this day I am unsure of what it was. There was also roasted chicken, slices of roast beef, leg of lamb, meatballs, and multitudes of pastas, salads, and freshly baked breads. The dessert table was a spread fit for royalty. I have no memory of all the fancy treats I indulged in, but I do know everything I ate was delicious. Both Todd and I left the restaurant feeling rather guilty of overeating! And of course, when our group completed this extravagant fare, several of us took the opportunity to grab a cappuccino from the lobby bar before hitting the road again.

## Kibbutz Lunch Buffet



Our bus trundled along, climbing the road toward a high mountaintop upon which rests the remains of Nimrod's Fortress, the largest Crusade-era castle in all Israel. The fortress overlooks and formerly controlled a road which began in Tyre (part of Lebanon today) and continued down the coast, through Hula Valley, Banias, and onward to Damascus. As one can guess, the castle is named after Nimrod, the great warrior described in Genesis:

*The sons of Ham were Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. The sons of Cush were Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabtechah; and the sons of Raamah were Sheba and Dedan. Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the*

*earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore, it is said, "Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD." And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah (that is the principal city). (Genesis 10:6-12)*

Many scholars believe it was Nimrod who can be credited for the building of the Tower of Babel since Babel is described above as the first of many cities which Nimrod built. The Tower of Babel incident reads as follows: *Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there*

*the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)*

While the fortress is currently described as a Crusader era edifice, many historians assert its namesake was given because the mountaintop is rumored to be where Nimrod had indeed originally built his castle. The entire site covers 49 acres, with lower western and upper eastern sections, a Northwest Tower, a Western Tower (not yet excavated), a Southwest Tower and pool, a Beautiful Tower, a dry moat, a Prison Tower, and even a Secret Passage. We wandered throughout the ruins for well over an hour, many of us fascinated by the experience of exploring our very first real-life castle. It was an amazing place and I now realize how fortunate we were to be able to tour the site. In future trips to Israel, it became much too busy from steadily increasing tourism for any of our groups to ever visit there again.



We finally boarded our bus again and headed to the next stop, which would be Mount Bental. There, we took in quite a panoramic view of the land and explored another military bunker. Our guide took the time to point out to us, if we looked closely in a specific direction, we could see the road to Damascus from this location. The Damascus Road conversion of the apostle Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, is a major, catalytic event which took place in New Testament times. The Scripture passages written below describe the incident:

*Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. (Acts 9:1-18)*

Once again, my view of Scripture was forever transformed by being able to physically see a portion of the road on which the apostle Paul's Damascus Road conversion happened. Every time I read this account in my Bible, I now picture the landscape and distant road; the words colorfully coming alive on the pages of Scripture simply because I was there.

It had become quite cold and windy on the northern mountaintop, so Todd and I were forced to don fleece jackets and warm our hands around yet

another hot cup of cappuccino from the gift shop and delicatessen on the site known as 'Coffee Annan". We eventually went back outdoors after some light shopping, and sat on a bench to await the rest of the group to assemble after taking one final restroom break. Suddenly, in that moment, an impressive-looking Israeli military helicopter swiftly flew over us. I was able to take a somewhat decent, but rather distant picture of it as the sun began its descent into the glowing horizon of yet another rapidly approaching end of day. As chilled as we all were, our group gladly climbed into the warm coach and settled in for the long ride back to our Tiberias hotel.

Once dinner was eaten, several of us went out and took some time to explore the streets near the hotel, where numerous open-air restaurants, souvenir booths, and shops remained open for tourist groups to visit after their day's travels. A musician played music on a corner, and multitudes of locals and tourists alike strolled happily throughout the area. We walked hand in hand along the well-lit boardwalk in front of the boat docks and enjoyed the sights, perusing the myriad gifts and trinkets for sale along the way. I remember it was here that Todd purchased a small shofar, which is the horn of a ram. Shofars are used ceremonially by the Jewish people according to religious customs and commands from the Old Testament. These horns were also used in former times to signify warnings, or calls to action in battles or in traveling, as well as in summoning the tribes to meet for various purposes.

We didn't have much luck making a very significant noise in blowing our new shofar, but we were quite pleased with the unique purchase, nonetheless.

## Chapter Ten

### Gideon Springs, Beit She'an, and Baptism

A new day dawned, our last morning in Tiberias. We wistfully drank in a final Galilean sunrise as we lingered on the hotel room balcony just a tad longer than usual. Then, placing our luggage outside the door for the bellmen to collect and load onto the bus, we headed down to breakfast. I looked rather intently around the hotel restaurant as I sipped coffee and slowly ate breakfast. I was trying to imprint everything about the place into my memory, knowing we were leaving it behind for good this day, as we headed onward toward new and uncharted territories lying southward. Having stayed there 3 nights, I found Tiberias had become a part of me, and I did not want to leave it behind. Finally, with a sigh of farewell lingering sadly in my heart, I stood up from the table and gathered with the others outside near the bus. We identified our luggage as it was placed in the underneath storage area, then boarded and picked our bus seats. Someone began reading the morning Psalm and prayed for the new day as we slowly rolled out of the ancient city of scribes.

The first stop on this day was to be at a place called Gideon Springs. The morning was brightly sunny, cheerful, and warm as we stepped off the bus and quickly hit nearby restrooms before walking to the site. The walkway leading to the site was beautifully

bordered on either side by stacked rock walls containing massive flowering hedges and shrubs planted atop. Cascading hues of deep pink, lavender, and white blossoms beckoned in the sunlight as we strolled toward the sound of trickling water. The park was truly a charming place. We finally reached an area where spring-fed waters languidly spread across a rocky stream bed at the base of a bluff. We had officially arrived at Gideon Springs, otherwise known as Ein Harod (Spring of Harod). It is this pool where Scripture tells us Gideon, who was called by God to be the 5<sup>th</sup> Judge of Israel, chose his 300 warriors based on how they drank water:

*Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' "Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.' And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.*

*But the LORD said to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' the*

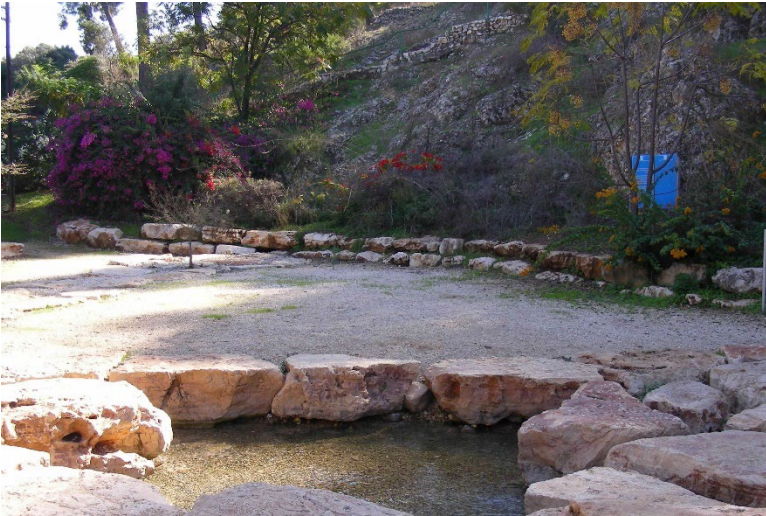
*same shall not go." So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink." And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water.*

*Then the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place." So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley. It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand." (Judges 7:1-9)*

After singing worship songs and hearing another wonderful testimony from someone in the group, our pastor taught on the above passage. The morning sun hotly beamed down upon us as we took in the teachings of Scripture, and I got up to find a shadier spot for comfort sake. A friendly stray cat roamed the grounds and eventually approached us as we listened to the teaching. A few people reached out to pet it and enjoy the pleasure of its company for a short moment before it wandered away.



Gideon Springs



After wandering the beautiful grounds and taking plenty of pictures, we made our way back to the bus and from there, headed to Beit She 'an, (a.k.a. Beth Shan, or Bet Se'an) a massive archaeological site where the ruins of the ancient city are continually being excavated and uncovered to this day. Canaanites had dwelt in the land before Israel took possession of it. But, because Israel failed to destroy and drive out all the inhabitants as God had originally commanded, King Saul and his sons would eventually die near here, at the hands of those who remained in the land, specifically, the Philistines. Assyrian conquests later destroyed Beit She 'an by means of fire, after which it was rebuilt in Byzantine and Roman periods. Beautiful Roman architecture and columns decorated the city, and many forms of shops, stalls, and market areas aligned the pillar-flanked main cardo.

Excavations have revealed Roman baths, public toilets, a Canaanite temple, graves, and many other evidences of urban settlement from various periods. A great earthquake finally forever caused the city to become uninhabited, and the toppled ruins remain for scholars, students, and tourists to explore to their hearts' content. Much of the city is still unexcavated, as evidenced by the massive Tel which towers over the viewable uncovered areas at its base. Our Bible study was held in the ruins of a steeply pitched Roman amphitheater and the pastor taught on the following passages which were significant to the site:

*Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines and fell slain on Mount Gilboa. Then the Philistines followed hard after Saul and his sons. And the Philistines killed Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons. The battle became fierce against Saul. The archers hit him, and he was severely wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armorbearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me." But his armorbearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore, Saul took a sword and fell on it. And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him. So Saul, his three sons, his armorbearer, and all his men died together that same day.*

*And when the men of Israel who were on the other side of the valley, and those who were on the other side of the Jordan, saw that the men of Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them. So it happened the next day, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. And they cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and sent word throughout the land of the Philistines, to proclaim it in the temple of their idols and among the people. Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.*

*Now when the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and traveled all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth Shan; and they came to Jabesh and burned them there. Then they took their*

*bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree at Jabesh and fasted seven days. (1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 31:1-13)*

We spent about two hours at Beit She'an, listening to our guide explain the various archeological discoveries while walking the grounds, and examining the detailed model of the city which was on display near the gift shop. It truly was an impressive excavation and I ended up taking far more photographs than necessary simply due to being so enthralled by the abundance of ruins. We wandered along the majestically columned cardo between the grand but dilapidated and fallen pillars, trying to imagine what life must have been like when the city was thriving.

I gazed at the distant, soaring Tel, envisioning what treasures and additional structures were still buried beneath it. I probably don't need to say it, but once we explored all that we felt we could, Todd and I each grabbed a steaming cup of cappuccino from the gift shop and sipped our brewed treat quietly as we gazed out over the city ruins, waiting for the rest of our group to finish touring the site and gather together. Several stray cats roamed the terrace and one of them hopped up onto the plastic chair next to us, looking for a handout. I had nothing to offer but a few amicable rubs on its furry head, and the kitty eventually settled in the cool shade underneath a nearby tree.



Main Cardo at Beit She'an

Our group finally left Beit She 'an after everyone did some light shopping. We rode the bus a short distance to the next stop, a lovely park called Sachne which means 'hot' in Arabic, or in Hebrew, the place is known as Gan HaShlosha, which translates to, 'park of the three'. This little piece of heaven is located in the lower Galilee region and contains three levels of warm, spring-fed pools surrounded by palm trees and rolling green lawns. Picnic tables dotted the landscape, and several people were gathered here and there to eat, swim, and enjoy the oasis. Waterfalls splash from one level to another and there were places along the shore where stone steps had been built to allow for easy entry into the pools. These areas made perfect spots for Christian baptisms. Two snack

buildings were located on either end of the sprawling park, as well as restrooms and changing areas.

We were informed our pastor preferred to baptize at this park because the other, more well-known location on the Jordan River which caters to baptisms had become a commercialized, overcrowded, tourist-trap area. The waters at Sachne were clear and warm, with a lively population of small fish swimming about. It was truly a peaceful and beautiful park very conducive to private events such as a baptism. Many of us changed into swimsuits and several people in our group lined up near one of the water entrances to be baptized on this day. Some had never been baptized before, others had been baptized as infants or children and therefore had no memory of it, and still others desired to be baptized in Israel as a form of recommitting their lives to Jesus Christ.

Whatever the case, our pastor and one of the other men in the group began baptizing whosoever wanted to be baptized. The worship leader played his guitar as we sang songs, and one by one everyone who was in line was baptized. It was a lovely and quite emotionally moving ceremony. Afterward, we all enjoyed swimming for a short time, and ate a late picnic lunch at some nearby picnic tables. The sandwiches were made and brought in by our bus driver and his wife. We were asked to donate money to pay for their expenses and we happily did so. The lunch tasted wonderful, and we were hungry! I believe Todd and I both ate a tuna and cheese sub, with a side

of chips and a soda. It was a perfect picnic meal in a memorable location, and we will always treasure it. We eventually made our way back to the bus and headed even further south, toward the Dead Sea where we would find our next hotel.



Sachne Park

## Chapter Eleven

### The Dead Sea

The drive from Sachne to the Dead Sea resort area was a little over 2 hours long, so we settled into our bus seats, and many gave in to the lure of a good nap. For those of us who remained awake, the guide instructed us regarding various points of interest along the way as we passed them. Whether it was to show us irrigated fields abundantly filled with crops, a significant landmark, or an interesting feature of the towns and villages we passed, our guide was a well of information and he happily told us all he could about his beloved land. We were told which settlements were Jewish and which were Arabic. We also saw Bedouin shepherd camps, complete with tents, camels, and livestock. The bus sped by the ancient city of Jericho, which, sadly, we did not visit. The guide informed us since it was under Arab control, Jericho was simply not a location which typically welcomed Jewish tour guides and busloads of Christian tourists.

The landscape had been steadily transforming from the lush green flora and fauna of the Galilee and regions north, into varying hues of tans and browns as we headed south toward the Negev Desert. The land on either side of the bus eventually became a series of rounded, cumin-tinted hills with deeply shadowed valleys, rolling and dipping as far as the eye could see. Sharply edged mountains began to thrust upward on

our right, boasting no vegetation at all; just infrequent caves, various rock outcroppings, fallen stones, and of course, sand. Erosion marks could be seen tracking along crevices through which water would rush during the former and latter rains every year. We were truly traveling through what the Bible calls 'the wilderness'. Finally, we began to see the first signs of the Dead Sea on our left. In former times, this sea was far bigger, stretching much further and deeper than it does now. The vestiges of starkly white salt layers, sand, and flatlands now lay in places where the saline waters used to glisten in the desert sunlight. Many sinkholes lay scattered about this region as well; the effects of groundwater welling up and dissolving dried layers of salt, creating underground cavities.

Recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament as the "Salt Sea" the Dead Sea gets its name from the extremely high salt and mineral content of its water. It contains roughly 1/3<sup>rd</sup> salt solids which causes an amazingly buoyant effect on anything entering the water, including people. The reason for the hyper salt content is that while the Jordan River and various rainwater runoffs enter the sea, nothing exits. Water flows in, but none flows out. The trapped water then evaporates in the arid desert climate, leaving the minerals behind, especially salt. Nothing can live in this water, but it is a wonderful place to rejuvenate, relax, and enjoy the health benefits of the Dead Sea salts, mineral-rich mud, and other various skin concoctions which have been created to handle

the needs of not only tourists but the cosmetic and skin care industry worldwide.

Every hotel built in this area includes the services of heated and unheated salt pools fed by the Dead Sea and offers many unique spa services relevant to the minerals of the sea. The Dead Sea is also the lowest elevation on earth, sitting at 1,407 feet below sea level. This provides a significant health benefit in that the air pressure is greater here, which forces more oxygen to enter the body, enhancing circulation and cell regeneration. Many people flock to the Dead Sea purely for health reasons, with some European countries even covering the costs of a several week sojourn to the area as a medically necessary treatment for certain afflictions. The low elevation benefits, the mineral benefits, and the beauty of such a unique place all provide for a restful and rejuvenating respite.

The Dead Sea recedes at a rate of about 3 feet per year. In 1930, its surface area was about 410 square miles. It is currently down to 235 square miles, with a land barrier now dividing it in two. The causes are twofold. Much of the Jordan River has been diverted away from it, for both farming and drinking water purposes, so the amount of water flowing into the Dead Sea from that source is greatly decreased. Additionally, mineral mining and desalination of the Dead Sea has been done by both Israel and Jordan increasingly, causing even greater depletion of the body of water in the past few decades. Hotels which were originally built directly on the beachfront of the

sea currently stand far away from the modern-day shoreline, and some of them are now forced to provide shuttles just to get their patrons down to the water's edge. In spite of these issues, the sea is still exceptionally beautiful to behold, and the resorts are continuing to flourish as they persistently adjust their grounds and services to deal with the ceaseless transformation of shoreline location and water accessibility. We rolled along the desert highway absorbing these facts as our guide chatted informatively about the area. I found myself mesmerized by such a beautiful and unique landscape –the Dead Sea and Jordanian border on our left, and craggy stone cliffs soaring on our right.

Occasionally the guide pointed out some of the larger and more obvious sinkholes which had swallowed up various camps, beaches, vehicles, and even buildings. Periodically, goats or sheep could be seen wandering at the base of a distant hill, and usually a Bedouin shepherd could be found nearby. Passing an isolated gas station, some of us excitedly spotted a saddled camel and its owner standing in the parking lot. I was able to take a quick picture, and it has always moved me – I wonder what he was thinking about as he stood next to his camel. Was he waiting for tourists to show up and ask for a picture or quick ride? Was he on his way home or traveling to see a neighbor or family member? I will never know the answer to such questions, at least not on this side of eternity!



As the sun began sinking slowly behind the mountains, our bus finally pulled in to one of the several Dead Sea hotels dotting the nearby shoreline – our new home for the next two nights. We grabbed our luggage from the side of the bus, entered into a cool and spacious lobby, and were given our assigned room keys. By now we were becoming accustomed to the routine. Our group gathered around so the hotel concierge could offer us some chilled water with cucumber slices. He then directed us as to when dinner and breakfast would be served, as well as the hours for the hot water spas and cold-water pools. He also gave us information on how to get to the hotel beach, instructions for towel locations, and an explanation on how to use the rinsing showers on site. Todd and I headed up to our new room, hoping

against hope that we would have a view of the sea from our balcony. We were in luck! Stepping out on the small, railed veranda of our room in the rapidly fading daylight, we could see the calm, salt-laden body of water lying just beyond the hotel's outdoor swimming pool below. Looking far across the mirrored surface, the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea sparkled brightly in the distance, city lights twinkling a signal of its existence as dusk began overtaking the evening. We tried taking a few pictures while breathing the night air deeply, dutifully trying to absorb all the health benefits of standing in the lowest place on earth. Then it was time to head downstairs and eat heartily from the resort's bountiful spread in one of its main restaurants.

The group enjoyed a lovely dinner and instead of sitting around to chat afterward, most of us hurriedly exited back up to our hotel rooms in order to don bathing suits and head downstairs for a soak in the large, heated jacuzzi pool on the lower level, which piped in salt water directly from the sea. It felt so wonderful! We waded into the hot pool and slowly let the steaming brine embrace our travel-fatigued bodies. It truly is an incredibly unique thing to experience soaking in the waters of the Dead Sea. The feel of the water itself is a strangely oily and somewhat slippery kind of wetness. And, with regard to buoyancy, it is rather alarming to realize one does not quite have full control of their own body. I kicked my feet out in order to float on my back, and it was fascinating how quickly

I found myself floating like a fishing bobber, but more incredibly, when I attempted to put my feet down again and stand, I unexpectedly could not do so! My first attempt caused me to end up floating on my belly with my feet kicked out behind me in the opposite direction! I took great care not to allow my face in the water as we were warned how dangerous that would be. Any ingestion of Dead Sea water into the lungs could actually kill a person and getting the salty water into our eyes would be an extremely painful and serious predicament as well.

As I awkwardly paddled my hands underneath the surface and struggled around while trying not to splash, I eventually was able to fight my way back to a standing position by using my arms to get myself upright. What a unique experience! Todd and I both had a fantastic time learning how to operate in that crazy hot pool. Because the salt content is so high, signs posted throughout the area warned of a 15-minute time limit in the heated pool. I can attest the lifeguard does keep track and will make people get out if they try staying in the water any longer than advised. Once out, we were instructed how important it was to rinse off thoroughly in the showers located throughout the spa area. We enjoyed the spa for as long as possible – getting out every 15 minutes, rinsing, and taking a rest in a poolside chair before going back in again. Finally, we determined it was time to go up to bed, so we climbed out of the water, rinsed off thoroughly, dried ourselves with fluffy white towels, and headed

to our room for the night. What a great ending to a very exceptional day!

Far too early the next morning, my eyes flickered open to a shadowy, dim, and unfamiliar hotel room. I groggily realized I was awake well before sunrise once again. Jet lag certainly carries a strong hold on some of us, and I began to wonder if I would ever awaken at a normal morning hour during this trip. After rolling around for a while in several unsuccessful attempts at falling back asleep, I gave up. Sighing tiredly, I determined to crawl out of bed and find my camera in order to take pictures of the sun which would soon rise over the Dead Sea horizon.

As I patiently rested on our balcony, awaiting the first glowing streaks, Todd eventually joined me. We both sat in our pajamas poised for an event many people never see in real life – a Dead Sea sunrise. Eventually the sky began to subtly change color and muted rays of light crept upward from the skyline indicating exactly where the sun would appear. Rose-hued bands then formed above increasingly bright, golden rays and finally, the crescent edge of a blazing, gilded ball of fire burst forth. It was almost as if the very sky itself was silently shouting with joy at the pleasure of a brand-new day! The process was so incredibly serene, peaceful, and beautiful to behold; yet boldly dazzling at the same time. Our cameras clicking, we stood amazed at the beauty of the scene. While neither of us are fans of losing sleep, Todd and I remain deeply grateful the Lord blessed us with jetlag.



## Chapter Twelve

### Masada and Dead Sea Swimming

After yet another colorful and delicious Israeli breakfast and several cups of wonderfully aromatic, strong, black coffee, Todd and I boarded the bus with the rest of the group. We headed to a nearby mountain called 'Masada'. This notorious formation overlooks the desert and the Dead Sea and contains the ruins of a large fortress and two palaces which Herod built as a refuge for himself sometime between 37 and 31 BC. When Rome attacked and destroyed the second temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD, a band of Jewish rebels and their families fled to Masada and hid there while the Romans laid siege to the mountain. Eventually, the Roman army succeeded in building an assault ramp up the mountain, breaching the walls and entering the fortress. However, what they found upon their arrival was all 960 Jews had chosen to kill each other and themselves rather than be captured. Only two women and five children were found alive, according to renowned historian, Flavius Josephus.

We entered the tourist building at the base of the mountain and watched a short movie about the site. Then we were given a choice to either climb the mountain or ride a tram to the top. Todd and I chose to climb with several others; however, the way was steep and long, the path very narrow and uneven, and the fiery desert sun quickly began taking its toll on our

bodies. About halfway up, Todd began to experience a narrowing of vision and had to sit down. After some discussion with our pastor, we both decided to go back down the mountain and ride the tram up, just for safety sake. We eventually met the rest of our group at the top and toured the fortress and palace remains for about 2 hours. The views were stunning from this isolated rock plateau. We could see a great expanse of the Dead Sea and the vast, barren, rocky landscape with neighboring mountains and desert flatlands surrounding us. Also viewable were the remains of the Roman siege camps on the ground below, as well as where the Romans had constructed a ramp to the fortress wall on one side. Our group eventually sat down in the ruins of an ancient mountaintop synagogue and held a Bible study which focused on Ezekiel 37, in which it is prophesied God will cause Israel to possess the promised land once again. Scholars say scrolls were found buried in this very synagogue and the scrolls were opened to this particular passage, as if the Jewish people who were hiding here knew God would bring them back again and therefore have the final victory in eternity. It was quite a study.

After riding back down the mountain, we ate a wonderful lunch in the food court on site and were given time to go shopping in an exceptionally large gift shop adjacent to the restaurant area. I purchased a lovely pair of dark brown leather sandals and some jewelry. Two popular gems found in Israeli jewelry are

the King Solomon's stone, otherwise known as the 'Eilat Stone' which is a lovely, mixed dark green color with bits of copper and turquoise; and Roman Glass or Sea Glass - beautiful pieces of polished ancient glass obtained from archaeological ruins or from ancient glass relics found in the sea. I bought a pair of King Solomon's stone earrings, and a necklace pendant containing Roman glass - both items I still treasure to this day.



A view from on top of Masada

Our group was given the rest of the afternoon off in order to provide sufficient time for us all to experience the beach and go swimming in the cool waters of the Dead Sea itself. It was a beautiful, bright, hot, and sunny afternoon. Several of us donned bathing suits once again and headed down to the sandy beach. Once there, we dumped our belongings on random beach chairs, and then carefully began the slippery process of wading into the sea. The water was cold but felt good in the arid desert heat of the day. We could feel the same strange oiliness we had experienced the night before in the hot pool, and when we reached our hands into the water to scoop up sand from the bottom, we were amazed to see our hands held a glistening pile of white salt instead of sand.

Eventually we all made it out to a deep enough point where we could float, and we entertained ourselves for quite some time with the various positions and goofy antics which can only be made possible by the extreme buoyancy of the sea. Finally, Todd and I rinsed off in the outdoor shower area and made our way back up to the hotel room. There, we changed into dry clothes with the intentions of heading out to a small, nearby shopping center. We had seen from our balcony a few recognizable retail signs not far from our hotel, one of them being a McDonalds and the other was a well-known shoe brand. It appeared to us there was a small, tourist-driven mini mall right next to those signs and we were curious about what we would find.

Hand in hand, we wandered down the sidewalk and turned in the direction where we saw the signs, passing a few other interesting-looking hotels and resorts along the way. Sure enough, we eventually spotted an entrance and once inside, a wide-open hallway led to several quaint tourist shops, as well as the aforementioned McDonalds and shoe store. As we browsed and explored the gift shops, we came across several Dead Sea skin and spa products which made great souvenir gifts for family members, so we purchased a few items. Additionally, we discovered a small market store which sold among a variety of other things, cheese, olives, crackers, chocolate, and wine. Now, it is a stated rule with our church tour group that we do not publicly partake of alcohol, primarily to be exceedingly cautious of our witness to others and also not to stumble anyone who may have an addiction issue. However, we were told it would certainly be allowable if anyone wanted to enjoy a glass of wine in the privacy of their own hotel room. Todd and I purchased a bottle of red Israeli wine and some cheese, crackers, and olives to go with it as a late afternoon snack. With shopping bags of market purchases in tow, we enjoyed the picturesque walk back to our resort and headed to our room.

Sitting comfortably on the balcony, we gazed out at the unique combination of mountain views and calm Dead Sea waters, while inhaling deeply the fresh, highly oxygenated evening air. Todd and I took a moment to praise and thank God for His great

blessings and provision. Then we happily nibbled on our delightful array of cheeses and olives, sipping a lovely glass of full-bodied Israeli wine as we did so. This relaxing 'balcony date' overlooking the Dead Sea forever stands out in my mind as one of the most special times of togetherness Todd and I have ever had. What a blessing! Dinner hour eventually drew near, so with appetites wetted we made our way down to the hotel restaurant for another great meal and time of fellowship with the rest of the group, talking with one another until bedtime. Finally, we walked to the elevator and headed to our room for bedtime. It was the end of another truly wonderful day in the land of my King.



View from Dead Sea hotel balcony

## Chapter Thirteen

### Ein Gedi

Morning broke and we enjoyed one last dawn overlooking the beauty of the Dead Sea before packing up our suitcases and leaving them outside the room to be collected and brought out to the bus. Taking a final, wistful glance at our stunning balcony view, we closed the room door and headed down to breakfast where we enjoyed our usual fare of eggs, cheeses, fish, salads, rolls, fruit, and yogurt. We nursed steaming cups of delicious black coffee and chatted with everyone about the day's schedule and how excited we all were at the prospect of arriving in Jerusalem that very evening.

We boarded the bus for a short ride to a desert oasis known as 'Ein Gedi' – which in Hebrew means 'spring of the young goat'. It is widely known this area was where David hid from King Saul, living in caves and relying on the waterfalls, underground springs, and wildlife as his source of sustenance. This place of exile is also where David wrote many of the Psalms, and it was easy to see the natural surroundings and wildlife of this oasis must have often inspired his vivid and poetic words.

The day was already becoming quite warm as the Negev sun beamed fiercely down upon us. After a quick visit to the restrooms, we gathered together to begin what was going to be a rather arduous hike

through the reserve and up a mountain – the goal being a waterfall at the top. Wildlife is abundant at Ein Gedi, which is primarily home to a type of wild goat known as ‘Ibex’, but one can also regularly come across wolves, foxes, and numerous other small animals. As we began walking down the path, immediately to our left, we saw several Ibex nonchalantly standing around, flicking their ears as flies buzzed about their heads. Everyone stopped to take pictures before continuing on the dusty route. We eventually gathered around a semi-circle shaped bench placed to the side of the walking trail and sang worship songs before taking in a Bible study which was incredibly relevant to this area. We opened our Bibles to 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 24:1-22.

*Now it happened, when Saul had returned from following the Philistines, that it was told him, saying, “Take note! David is in the Wilderness of En Gedi.” Then Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel and went to seek David and his men on the Rocks of the Wild Goats. So he came to the sheepfolds by the road, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to attend to his needs. (David and his men were staying in the recesses of the cave.) Then the men of David said to him, “This is the day of which the LORD said to you, ‘Behold, I will deliver your enemy into your hand, that you may do to him as it seems good to you.’ ” And David arose and secretly cut off a corner of Saul’s robe.*

*Now it happened afterward that David’s heart troubled him because he had cut Saul’s robe. And he said to his men, “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to*

*my master, the LORD's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD." So David restrained his servants with these words, and did not allow them to rise against Saul. And Saul got up from the cave and went on his way. David also arose afterward, went out of the cave, and called out to Saul, saying, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed down.*

*And David said to Saul: "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Indeed David seeks your harm'? Look, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD delivered you today into my hand in the cave, and someone urged me to kill you. But my eye spared you, and I said, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD's anointed.' Moreover, my father, see! Yes, see the corner of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the corner of your robe, and did not kill you, know and see that there is neither evil nor rebellion in my hand, and I have not sinned against you. Yet you hunt my life to take it.*

*Let the LORD judge between you and me, and let the LORD avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Wickedness proceeds from the wicked.' But my hand shall not be against you. After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue? A dead dog? A flea? Therefore, let the LORD be judge, and judge between you and me, and see and plead my case, and deliver me out of your hand." So it was, when David had finished speaking these words to Saul, that Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?"*

*And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. Then he said to David: "You are more righteous than I; for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil. And you have shown this day how you have dealt well with me; for when the LORD delivered me into your hand, you did not kill me. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him get away safely? Therefore, may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. And now I know indeed that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. Therefore, swear now to me by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not destroy my name from my father's house." So David swore to Saul. And Saul went home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold. (1 Samuel 24:1-22)*

Todd and I were excited for the hike. By this time our muscles were used to the daily walking and hiking, and we had also gained some nice suntans over the past week's worth of outdoor activities, so we were feeling seasoned and ready for the new challenge. Since David had once roamed this area and wrote his Psalms here, I most certainly wanted to take in as much of this oasis adventure as I could. Standing up from the study, we looked around before advancing on our walk. Rocky cliffs rose up on either side of the path ahead, and several dilapidated caves could be seen high up, periodically dotting the eroded, sandy-looking cliff walls. The sky above sang of clear blue heights, while the silent Dead Sea behind us gleamed distantly in the sun. Random goats or Ibex periodically meandered into our line of vision. The air was

continuing to heat up, and I was very glad to be wearing summer attire this day. It certainly felt like we were standing in a desert wasteland, a wilderness, yet there were glimpses of green to be seen on the trail ahead, beckoning us inward and upward. Once we had our Bibles packed up, we took water bottles out and began the long walk up the mountain. It really felt great to be moving because small, pesky flies had begun to swarm the group during worship and Bible study.

It was not long before we began to see little pools of water on either side of the path, bubbling happily in the desert sun, fed by slowly trickling flows which were spilling off the rocks above. Reeds began to show forth in abundance, bright green and swaying in the light breeze. Smaller rocks and stones were often underfoot, and we had to take caution because some of them were wet; water pooling around them as it gurgled forth somewhat tranquilly in seeking to reach its eventual destination. At certain places, the tall reeds formed a wet, murky, living cave through which the group had to carefully walk, sidestepping streams of water underfoot and fumbling about in the cool darkness until daylight spilled in at the other side.

Eventually the trail transitioned into a sun-bleached, weathered rock staircase, chiseled into the mountainside, becoming ever steeper and narrower. We rounded a corner and found ourselves gazing at a much larger pool than any of the previous ones. Some local people were swimming in the aqua blue waters

as a sparkling cascade lightly toppled onto them from the rockface above them. It looked wonderfully refreshing! Our group continued to hike along the steep ascent, taking rest breaks and drinking from our water bottles as needed. One particularly high turn caused us to stop for a moment and catch our breath, and in doing so we found ourselves turning around simply to appreciate the beautiful vista of mountains on either side of us framing a deep ravine, which showcased a sweeping panorama of the far-off, silvery crystalline Dead Sea touching the broad, bright blue sky. Cameras came out and we all paused to drink in the lovely scene for a few minutes. I tried to imagine what it had been like for David to live here, surrounded by desert wilderness yet blessed with this God-given oasis. He must have had an enormous amount of serious time alone with God; seeking His wisdom, His comfort, and the spiritual strength he required to continue his exile until it was no longer necessary.

The hiking resumed and we were told our destination was almost at hand. Todd and I began to hear the hard splashing of a much bigger waterfall than the smaller ones we had discovered along the way. A few more sharp turns and steep climbs brought us to the place our guide had promised. Craning our necks, we could look up and see the top of the cliff from where the waters cascaded down. Looking straight forward, we observed the strong but narrow flow of water ceaselessly pouring into a shallow, shaded pool

directly ahead of us. Moss covered the dappled rock behind the falls, and we were immediately cooled by the lower temperature of the air at this location.

The water in the pool was clear and cold. We all imagined David and his men drinking it and resting in this place. Truly, it was a beautiful site – a sure reward after the laborious hike. Our group milled about and relaxed for a time. I knelt down and splashed the bracing water onto my face for an enjoyable moment of relief from the hot climb. Some of the younger members hoisted themselves up on top of various larger boulders to improve their view of the landscape and the distant sea. Many of us posed in front of the waterfall for a memorable photo to be taken. Finally, we all determined it was time to trek back down the mountain, so we ambled along the return path enjoying the views as we went. Needless to say, climbing down was much easier and we made good time in getting back to the park building. After using the restrooms and fitting in a bit of shopping at the park gift store (I recall it was here that I bought an Israeli recipe book), Todd and I grabbed a cappuccino and boarded the bus. It felt extra nice to rest in the air-conditioned coach as we motored along to the next stop.

## Ein Gedi





## Chapter Fourteen

### Dead Sea Scrolls and Camels

Following the Dead Sea coastline northward, we eventually reached our next point of interest, a park called Qumran. It was in this area the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in several caves. A young Bedouin shepherd found the scrolls because he had thrown a stone into the mouth of a cave in 1947, in an effort to scare up a lost sheep. As a result, the stone hit a clay jar which was filled with 7 scrolls of Scripture. These scrolls were then sold to various local antique dealers and eventually gained the attention of scholars after the value of the find became ascertained.

A concentrated effort of archeological exploration in the Qumran area ultimately led to the discovery of a total of 972 texts, all of which were believed to have once belonged to a deeply religious sect of Jews known as the Essenes. The Qumran site displays many uncovered and excavated portions of the Essene settlement and its numerous ritual baths. Our group sat through a short movie teaching about the site and the Essenes, then we walked around the ruins for a while, learning from the guide more details about some of the caves as we took pictures. It was truly fascinating to see where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, knowing their existence further verified the authenticity of the Bibles we held in our hands and studied daily. It was also suggested by our guide

many Bible scholars believe John the Baptist actually was an Essene, which would explain his manner of dress, diet, and appearance in the wilderness, preaching of sin and repentance as he prepared peoples' hearts to seek their coming promised Messiah. I had to admit the theory was quite plausible and it gave us a lot to think about. I took some time to study the varying accounts in each of the Gospels with regard to how John the Baptist entered the scene. Below is Luke's version, which is the most lengthy and descriptive.

*Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:*

*'The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the LORD;  
Make His paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled  
And every mountain and hill brought low;  
The crooked places shall be made straight  
And the rough ways smooth;  
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*

*Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee*

*from the wrath to come? "Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

*So, the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise, the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So, he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."*

*Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.*

*(Luke 3:1-18)*

One of the many caves at Qumran where biblical scrolls were found.



We enjoyed some shopping time in the wonderful gift store onsite, and it was here I purchased a small cross made of olive wood. Olive wood souvenirs are extremely popular in Israel, the wood being so plentiful. Whether one chooses a cross, a salad bowl set, a carved nativity set, or a donkey figurine, the olive wood these items are made from is incredibly unique and beautiful with its striated and varied wood colors running throughout. Other items which the Dead Sea gift shop was known for included the Ahava brand of skin care products, created specifically in Israel from the Dead Sea and its unique minerals. Many of us collected Ahava bath salts and skin creams with the rest of our purchases before

boarding the bus once again. We continued northward toward Jerusalem. The group was getting very hungry, having had only snacks at the Qumran gift shop in lieu of a proper lunch. This was because we were scheduled to enjoy a late afternoon meal (which ended up being more like an early evening meal!) at a unique place called Genesis Land, which was situated in the desert hills not far from Jerusalem. Eventually the bus turned off the main highway and began following a rising, curvy road which brought us back into those rolling, dipping depths of brown and tan slopes we had seen a few days previously on our journey southward toward the Dead Sea. Set in the midst of these hills were several large, permanent tent structures, and as we pulled up, we could see numerous camels lounging about.



A man dressed in Old Testament Era shepherd garments greeted us animatedly as we alighted from our bus and gathered around him on the grounds in front of one of the tented buildings. His informed us his name was 'Abraham' and he thanked us for gracing his home with our presence. He then took us into his tent where he asked if we would please put on raiment more akin to his as he passed around a basketful of various sized vest-like tunics which we all put on over our normal clothing. Our enthusiastic host then talked to us about how somewhere in this area, he (Abraham) and his nephew Lot had to separate ways because their flocks and families had grown too large to share the same fields without strife. We were directed to the Bible passages which discussed this event, as our new friend Abraham stayed in character the duration of our visit:

*Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. Now the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. The Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. So, Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left."*

*And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom. But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD. And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are – northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered. Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you." Then Abram moved his tent and went and dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built an altar there to the LORD. (Genesis 13:5-18)*



Abraham and myself at Genesis Land

Abraham then brought us back outside where he and his helpers caused all of the camels to lower onto the ground so we could mount them, two people to a camel. I was wildly excited to ride a camel for the first time in my life. What a unique opportunity! To be able to say I rode a camel in Israel was something I very much coveted, and I was literally giddy with anticipation. Camels are very strange animals. They

are rather massive, awkward, ornery creatures, and tend to make noises which sound to my ears like Chewbacca from the Star Wars movies. Camels also hiss and spit and will bite if they are feeling particularly cantankerous. Therefore, each camel must have a trained guide who keeps control of it and makes it obey specific commands with regard to loading up the tourists, walking them, and unloading them.

The first camel I was placed upon did not like me at all! I do not know what I did to deserve his disapproval, but from the moment I was mounted, it kept turning its head to huffily 'growl' at me and try to bite me, so I was immediately taken off that one and placed on a different one. Once Todd got on behind me, we were told to lean backward so we could avoid toppling over the camel's head while it got onto its feet. We leaned back, lurched clumsily forward as the camel stood, and then we were successfully up. After much squealing, laughing and nervous exclamations, the whole group was fully mounted, and we were led along a trail toward what was to be our dining tent. What an experience! I can strongly attest that riding a camel is not at all similar to riding a horse. The saddle slopes differently, the gait of the animal is completely distinct, and the whole time I felt as though I were falling forward onto the camel's head. I greatly enjoyed the ride because it was such an unusual experience, however I cannot say it was a comfortable one. We finally reached a much larger tent, and I was thankful to dismount without incident. Our group was

directed to use nearby restrooms and wash up for dinner. Meanwhile, we could smell the tantalizing aroma of food cooking and our stomachs were grumbling in anticipation.

As we gathered around Abraham once again, he guided us into a colorful tent. Unlike camping tents such as what one would see in campgrounds and parks throughout the United States, this tent was a huge, wooden-beamed structure swathed in colorful tarps and blankets. One entire side of the tent was completely open to the magnificent vista of layered rolling hills and valleys stretching for miles and miles beyond. The floor itself was also covered in brightly striped blankets, and a series of large, low, round tables were scattered about. At every low table there were 8 cushions where we were to sit and eat, just as they would have done in biblical times.

We each found a spot to sit while our host and his servants brought out fresh squeezed lemonade and ice water for every occupied table. Next, we were served warm pita bread and a large plate of homemade hummus drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with *Za'atar*, a delicious spice blend usually made from herbs such as dried thyme, oregano, marjoram, or even sumac, and sesame. Additionally, various Mediterranean relishes, salsas, and vegetable mixtures were placed on the tables, for filling the pitas if desired. As we hungrily munched on these hearty appetizers, I noticed a large fluffy cat sitting in the corner of the tent, lazily eyeing us up from a safe distance, probably

waiting for a bit of accidentally dropped food. I brought out my camera and took a picture as I pointed him out to the rest of the table.



Genesis Land



Finally, the main course was brought out and wow, did it smell great! Platters of rich, Israeli-spiced meatballs and slow-roasted, date honey-glazed chicken were passed around every table. Steaming bowls of Israeli yellow rice (which is rice cooked with turmeric and a chicken broth base) accompanied this delicious fare, and we energetically dug in, feasting to our hearts content as we gazed out upon the amazing landscape. Food always tastes better when one is extra hungry, but I still believe this was the best tasting chicken I have ever eaten; the savory, aromatic meat was tender and falling off the bone. Whenever a platter or serving bowl became low, the waiters immediately replenished the food generously. No one was allowed to want for anything. As people began to slow down and show signs of appetites sated, the serving staff began to bring around trays with tiny cups of piping hot sage and lemongrass tea, as well as Turkish coffee and platters of dates and dried apricots for dessert. We all tried a little bit of everything, and many of us took a liking to the unique tasting tea. It really hit the spot after such a glorious feast.

I sat back on my cushion as I sipped hot tea, wearing my strange-looking shepherd's vest, and looked around at everyone else doing the same thing. I pondered the events of the afternoon and could not quite absorb the fact that we had all put on shepherd clothing, climbed onto camels, and rode them along a trail in a land which had really and truly been owned and lived in by Old Testament men of faith; Abraham,

and Lot. With the experience then culminating in us sitting on the ground around low tables in an authentic Israeli tent, open on one side to the hills and sky, while being entertained with a detailed biblical reenactment of Old Testament Israeli hospitality and a delightful meal... I could hardly wrap my brain around the whole occasion! I kept thinking, "I rode a camel!" and even more momentous to me was the understanding, "I rode a camel in God's Holy Land, Israel's Promise Land, and ultimately, the 'Land of my King!'" Wow. Amen!

We finally arose from the strange tables and stretched our somewhat cramped bodies. Then we utilized the restrooms before mounting the camels again for a ride back to the welcome shop and parking lot where our bus was parked. Taking off our shepherd vests, some of us made purchases in the tiny gift shop. I bought a bag of the special sage and lemongrass tea we were served after dinner, and two small pieces of unique-looking, green stoneware pottery along with a few other souvenirs. Genesis Land holds an incredibly special place in my heart, and I am blessed to have been able to visit the site several times since.



The hills where Abraham and Lot separated



## Chapter Fifteen

### Arriving in Jerusalem

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is in her palaces; He is known as her refuge. (Psalm 48:1-3)*

The sun was hanging lower and lower in the sky by the time we boarded the bus to leave Genesis Land. It had been a long, busy, and exciting day, yet as tired as most of us were, we were greatly anticipating our first views of the holy city, Jerusalem. The drive was not going to be long so we all kept eyes peeled and noses to the windows, waiting for the moment when the city would pop into sight. Eventually, as the bus rounded a corner, we began to see the first signs of the more remote buildings and outlying neighborhoods of Jerusalem. It was at that time our guide put in a cd on the bus sound system and chose a beautiful song called 'Jerusalem' to be played as we drew near the city of our God and King. We found ourselves deeply moved by the song as the bus circled and climbed its way into Jerusalem. Some people were brought to tears, overwhelmed to be entering God's great city, so often read about in the pages of Scripture. It was certainly a dramatic way to approach our final destination of the day! Though the sun crept further downward, our

pastor directed the driver to take us to the top of the Mount of Olives where there was a scenic overlook. The driver obeyed dutifully, and the group excitedly climbed out as quickly as possible when he reached his instructed destination. Atop the mountain, we stood breathless at our first sight of the striking, massive Temple Mount below, as softening rays of the soon-setting sun brightly bounced off the golden dome of the rock, bathing the entire city beyond in a rose gold glow. The scene brought to mind the psalmist's glorious declaration:

*We have thought, O God, on Your lovingkindness, in the midst of Your temple. According to Your name, O God, so is Your praise to the ends of the earth; Your right hand is full of righteousness. Let Mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of Your judgments. Walk about Zion, and go all around her. Count her towers; Mark well her bulwarks; Consider her palaces; that you may tell it to the generation following. For this is God, our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to death. (Psalm 48:9-14)*

A lone camel obediently rested in the center of the overlook plaza area, with a vividly red striped blanket and saddle on its back; the owner holding a tether to lead it. Clearly, the man was hoping for one or two last random tourists to pay a fee for a picture or a ride on his 'Middle East Beast' before he headed to his home for the day. A few people from our group took him up on his inviting offer, and after he received his asking price, he helped them mount up on his

camel and pose in front of the distant Temple Mount and surrounding city while using their cameras to capture the memory. Another vendor appeared, offering a large selection of colorful cashmere scarves at 5 for \$20, so several of us purchased an assortment of them to wear during the remainder of the tour and also to take home as gifts.

One of the uniquely beautiful features of Jerusalem is the fact that by law, every city building must be constructed of a creamy, gold-hued stone known as 'Jerusalem Stone'. It consists of various types of limestone and dolomite which has been historically mined throughout the nation of Israel. Additionally, in the Old City areas, most of the streets are cobbled using the same stone. Archaeological excavations underneath Jerusalem reveal the same type of stone was used for older streets and buildings, including those found from the era of Jesus. The use of Jerusalem Stone results in a stunning landscape richly displaying a multitude of cream-colored buildings, which, as the city is set upon a hill, makes for a picturesque and somewhat glowing vista, lovely to behold.

As we stood looking out over the city, what became noticeable was the entire mountainside between us and the Temple Mount was covered with row upon row of stone coffins (sarcophagus). Additionally, from our vantage point, we were also noticing the lines of a beautiful, exceptionally large, double-arched entry gate built within the Temple

Mount wall which was completely filled in with some type of concrete or stone blocks so as not to be usable. Fascinated, we asked the guide to explain. He informed us that the Jews believe the dead will be resurrected as Scripture promises, and because the Mount of Olives is located directly in front of the East Gate, which according to prophecy is holy and will remain shut until the Lord Himself returns, the Jews believe the dead buried here will arise first in the coming resurrection. Thus, for thousands of years, the Jews have buried their dead on this hilly location, and one day, the sealed Eastern Gate will be opened by the Lord Himself.

*And the glory of the LORD came into the temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east. (Ezekiel 43:3)*

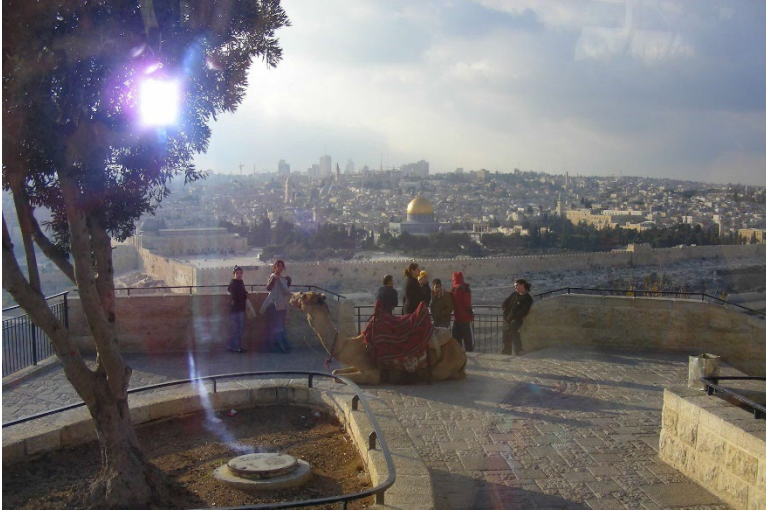
*Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the LORD said to me, "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore, it shall be shut. (Ezekiel 44:1, 1)*

*And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. (Zechariah 14:4)*



East Gate





Atop the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem.



The city of Jerusalem was scheduled to be our home base for the last 5 days of the tour. Not only were we thrilled to have so much time allotted for the exploration of God's magnificent city and its surrounding areas, but Todd and I were also looking forward to a longer stay in one hotel simply for the ease of not having to unpack and pack as often as we had been thus far.

Our bus made its way down from the overlook and eventually we arrived at our hotel in Jerusalem. Once the luggage was unloaded and the group was checked in, we headed up the elevators to our designated rooms. The room Todd and I were assigned was on a high floor, so we had lovely views of the city. An angled balcony off the room's outer corner boasted one small chair and table. We settled in and unpacked a bit, taking some time to marvel at how much of Jerusalem we could see from the balcony, then met up with the rest of our people in the lower-level restaurant for dinner together.

Once again, the buffet offered a wonderful array of delicious looking food – fresh salads, a variety of breads, large vats of delicious-looking soups, unique side dishes, fragrantly steaming main entrees, colorful relishes, an assortment of olives, condiments, and of course, desserts. We dug in hungrily and, needless to say, greatly enjoyed our new hotel's abundant provisions. While some of the younger group members decided to venture out and explore the city, Todd and I chose to retire to our rooms and go to bed.

It had been a wonderful but incredibly busy day and we wanted to be well-rested for tomorrow's adventures.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Garden of Gethsemane and Palm Sunday Road

Todd and I enjoy sleeping with the windows open being firm believers in the health benefits of fresh air, and waking up with the sun to cheerful sounds of morning birds chirping. Staying in Jerusalem was no different, so we left the hotel room's balcony door propped open by way of the lone chair, despite the more charged atmosphere of busy traffic, honking horns, city lights, and night life sounds. We slept well regardless of the higher energy environment, and awakened early as usual. After eating another glorious breakfast with the group, we slammed our coffee and boarded the bus for what promised to be an extremely exciting day. The bus driver made his way back up to the top of the Mount of Olives where we unloaded and gathered for sightseeing and dazzling morning views of the city. Our guide then began walking us down the steep street toward the Old City walls and the Temple Mount, a street which is known to all as "Palm Sunday Road". We were told somewhere down this Mountain, Jesus would have ridden the colt of a donkey while people threw palm branches and rejoiced in His coming, as the following Bible passage describes.

*Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you,*

*and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:*

*"Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Behold, your King is coming to you,  
Lowly, and sitting on a donkey,  
A colt, the foal of a donkey."*

*So, the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying:*

*"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!  
Hosanna in the highest!"*

*And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" So, the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11)*

Palm Sunday Road was rather narrow and lined with walls made of Jerusalem stone. Flowers and vines spilled over some of the walls, adding brilliant

splashes of color and life to the scene. As we made our descent, single file to avoid random vehicles and taxis driving up and down on the narrow route, we noticed various gates and doorways, as well as a public restroom – which we were directed to use while we had the chance.



Palm Sunday Road

Our pastor and guide then brought us to one of the gated doorways in the wall and ushered us into a peaceful garden which seemed altogether far removed from the busy, tourist-filled street. Magnificently-aged olive trees were growing throughout the garden areas, several of which scientists have dated up to 900 years old! These trees were very wide, with dozens of gnarly

knotted trunks (somewhat reminiscent of deeply aged, old men) growing up from the earth and spreading outwardly into graceful branches dressed in majestic silvery leaves which rustled in the morning breezes. The location to which we were led was one of several small areas specifically set aside for Bible study groups to spend time in, as long as an appointment was made prior, and money was donated afterward. Our group family gathered in a section containing wooden benches for sitting and we began singing worship songs.



It was at this site Todd and I were asked by our pastor to give our own personal testimonies, as to how we began following Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. I was far too nervous to speak in front of

everyone on that first Israel trip, so Todd graciously spoke for the both of us. As time passed I eventually became comfortable enough to share my part of our salvation story on my own. But, on this occasion I could not, and I will always be grateful for Todd's sure and calm presence as he and I stepped up in front of the group, where he proceeded to tell both of our stories. This book would not be complete without the sharing of our tale, so the following two chapters contain the testimony of how both Todd and I were found by Jesus Christ and brought into God's loving family as born-again believers.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Todd's Story

I grew up in a Catholic family and have childhood memories of attending mass, genuflecting, and doing catechism work. I always felt like the clock was literally going backwards when I was in church. I do not remember learning much about God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible as a child. The one thing I did walk away with was an opinion the church wanted my membership because it wanted my money – and it was simply a place I had no intention of spending any time in as an adult.

I graduated high school, joined the Navy Reserves, and attended college for a short time. From adolescence through adulthood, I was an outgoing and fun-loving guy – always ready to help friends and family, and enjoy social times together. I liked dating women, working hard, and striving to prosper at all aspects of life. This, of course, often translated into partaking of the usual and normal outlets found in today's secular culture such as casual promiscuity, a pornography habit, partying, accumulating possessions, and just largely living for myself. I met my first wife, fell in love, and got married not long afterward. I also began working for my father's company in a sales position and quickly became quite successful. My wife and I loved buying nice things, having a well-decorated house, entertaining friends

and family, and seeking to enjoy the finer things in life over the first part of our marriage. However, eventually, our relationship began to suffer as it so often does in today's culture once the honeymoon phase comes to an end. When two beautiful children arrived on the scene, we spent most of our time learning how to be good parents rather than addressing the steadily growing resentments and distancing that was happening to our marriage relationship. Unfortunately, the romance continued to trickle away year after year, and we grew more and more detached from one another.

The situation steadily worsened. Too many years were spent depriving one another of what each one needed, and there was indeed a breaking point. Divorce became the prevalent option, yet I continued to struggle to figure out how to save the marriage. I read several books on marriage, but nothing on the bookstore racks offered viable solutions. I found myself standing at night in the kids' bedrooms, gazing down at them with deep sorrow as they slept, and pondering what harm we would likely be doing to their young, innocent worlds with what appeared to be an impending divorce.

It was during this time period a Christian neighbor and acquaintance stopped by and handed me a book, saying, "I haven't read this myself, but God told me to give you this book." I remember smiling at her and thanking her while silently thinking, "She's obviously crazy." Regardless of this inner, eye-rolling

opinion, I was desperate, and began reading the book, which was called, "Love Life for Every Married Couple" written by a Christian doctor, Dr. Ed Wheat. The author used the Bible as his foundation and utilized numerous Scripture references to teach how husbands and wives ought to be treating one another according to God. The doctor also went into detail about the several different types of love which are described in the Greek and Hebrew languages of the Bible - differences which English translations do not reflect.

In English, we only have one word for love, and it can apply to just about any level of feeling, be it a love for pizza or love for a child. The love which Dr. Wheat discussed at great length in this particular marriage book is known as 'Agape' in the Greek. I learned from this book that agape love is a purposeful, choice-based love, not a feeling. It is a love which values, serves, and gives unconditionally; it is a love of action and is born of the will rather than born of emotion. Ultimately, I gained an understanding agape love is the level of love God manifested for the entire human race when He sent His Son to die to atone for our sinful nature - an inherited nature which wires us to live our lives without a relationship with our Creator from the moment we are born. Dr. Wheat taught agape love is concerned with doing what is best for the beloved, regardless of their response. Its source is God, and it can be fueled by nothing less than the power of Holy Spirit. Such a love cannot be completely understood by the unbelieving world.

*For God so loved [agapao] the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)*

Dr. Wheat's book also shared in depth about proper, biblical roles in marriage and discussed the importance God places upon those roles for a successful, blessed, peaceful, and prosperous marriage. I could not put the book down, and by the time I finished it, I was excited. I thought, "Wow, if everyone had a marriage according to how it is described in this book, no one would ever get a divorce!" But, I also had doubts. I had never read a Bible before, so I decided to crosscheck Dr. Wheat's book with the Bible and see if it really said the things the doctor had written in the marriage book. I bought a Bible, and because I did not know how to look anything up, I also bought a book on how to read the Bible. After careful and close examination of the passages Dr. Wheat referenced throughout his book, I was convinced the Bible did indeed teach about marriage in a logical way which made perfect sense. It was at this point I gave my wife a copy of Dr. Wheat's book and told her this is the kind of marriage we needed to have. However, there was too much damage done to the relationship and thus, we still ended up filing for divorce.

However, for me, this was not the end, but a new beginning. I had maintained a close friendship with a former neighbor, a woman who had gotten a divorce from her husband the year before. Her name

was Miranda, and in her own sadness over what had transpired with her broken marriage and two very young children, she had begun attending a church close to her rented apartment outside of town. As former neighbors and friends, we had always had a lot in common, but more recently, a special chemistry had become ignited between us. I approached her one day with the marriage book and asked her to read it, telling her if I were to ever marry again, I wanted the kind of marriage the book described – a biblical, Christian marriage. Miranda quickly finished reading Dr. Wheat’s book and was in complete agreement with its biblical marriage principles. It was not long before I began attending Miranda’s little countryside Lutheran church right along with her and her small children. Six months after my divorce had finalized, I asked Miranda to be my wife and we were married within a month of the engagement by the pastor at the Lutheran church.

For both of us, the new marriage was amazing, fulfilling and beyond all expectations. We were also exploring our Bibles further, having deduced if God’s teachings were sound regarding marriage, we could find biblical help with raising our four children together. Sure enough, the more we learned what the Bible taught on child-rearing, the more success we had as parents. Studying the Bible became increasingly important to us. We eventually stumbled across a Bible-teaching radio station called “CSN Radio”. All day long the station broadcasted half-hour Bible

teachings given by various pastors from across the country, with modern Christian music sprinkled in between teachings. I would listen to it in my car to and from work and whenever I had a jobsite to visit. Miranda would listen during the day as she took care of the home and the kids. Though we had both attended a membership class at the Lutheran church and made a commitment to faith, believing God sent His Son, Jesus Christ to die for our sins, we began to realize the Bible teaches we must be born again, and the only way to do that is to repent of old ways of living – which had always naturally been under our own self-rule and in a secular, godless manner. The pastors on the radio station often encouraged their listeners that if they had not done so yet, the way to become born again was to personally pray to God in the Name of Jesus Christ, and ask Him into their lives to be their Lord and Savior, and then start living for God and His purposes instead of their own.

One day, I pulled over to the side of the road and prayerfully gave my life to Jesus Christ – and even found myself doing so again and again, whenever another Bible teaching deeply convicted my spirit. By the same token, Miranda went to her knees in the living room one day after a particularly powerful teaching, and gave her life to Jesus Christ – she did this more than once as well, to be sure! There is no reason to do this more than once, of course, but sometimes, when one is a brand-new believer, the heart becomes so convicted by the teachings of God’s Word, one ends

up on the knees time and time again. Needless to say, our lives have never been the same since! We eventually left the Lutheran church and began going to a Bible-teaching church where we were able to continuously learn, grow, and strengthen our faith by reading through the Bible from start to finish, year after year - and it was through this church that we began going to Israel.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Miranda's Story

I had grown up in a farming family 30 miles from the nearest town. Once I reached the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, ours became the 2<sup>nd</sup> family in the entire local school system to have divorced parents. I lived in a “Brady Bunch-style” household once both of my parents remarried, and spent the rest of my youth residing primarily at my father’s home with 2 brothers, 2 stepbrothers, a stepsister, and eventually, a new baby half-brother. We all grew to love one another very much. Like any family, we experienced good times with one another, and endured many hardships together as well.

Both of my parents had periodically encouraged a general belief in God and when we were small, they taught us to say nightly prayers, but attending church and Bible reading were really not a big part of our childhood. My father, an artist, teacher, and dairy farmer, was a strong proponent of allowing his children to grow up and make their own decisions about what they believed in, spiritually. Therefore, I pretty much grew up seeking my own way, living for myself, chasing after a personal goal of a college degree and whatever else life had to offer me. I did not think about God, at least not often, and I lacked a real understanding of God, Jesus Christ, Christian faith, human purpose, and eternity. I put myself through

college, regretfully spending far too much time the first two years enjoying the attention of boys and the college partying lifestyle. Eventually, I met a genuinely nice, smart, decent man who was a few years older than me. We dated, became engaged after he graduated, and then, when I finally obtained my own college degree, we were married. Something was never quite right with our relationship, but I did not know what it was. Sadly, six and a half years later, without even understanding how things could go so wrong, we found ourselves divorcing shortly after my second daughter was born.

I moved out with my toddler and baby to an apartment just outside of town, dependent on child support from my now ex-husband as the sole means of financial survival. I had a college degree but no career because I had become a stay-at-home mother when my first daughter was born. I was sad, angry, and devastated at the destruction of our little family. Yet, I was also motivated to push forward and figure out where to go from that point. One day, I called the phone number of a small white church which was about a mile from my apartment. I had thought it would be good to find out what the service times were just in case I got up the courage or energy to possibly attend. My feeling was that maybe going to church would help me feel like a 'better person'. Instead of a recording, however, the pastor actually answered the phone. I was not prepared for a live conversation. After asking him what time on Sundays his church met, I

suddenly burst into uncontrollable tears, explaining I was recently divorced and in a bad place, emotionally. The pastor listened patiently and kindly encouraged me and my girls to join them the next Sunday.

I began attending this church regularly with the girls, and liked the pastor and the people there very much. I even felt like I was slowly beginning to understand Who God was and why He sent His Son to die for me. Also, by this point, my old neighbor Todd and I had begun spending quite a bit of time together. I was feeling things for him which I had never felt for anyone in my entire life and was not sure what to be doing about it. One day he stopped over and handed me a book he had been reading, called "Love Life for Every Married Couple" by Dr. Ed Wheat. Todd told me it had the solution to every marriage problem spelled out within, and that it was biblically based. He also said if he were to ever marry again, he wanted the kind of marriage the book portrayed.

I read the book and was entirely amazed. I had no idea the Bible taught foundational marriage precepts and upon reading what they were, it all made perfect sense to me. The Bible describes the kind of marriage where the husband truly is 'the knight in shining armor' my heart was so desperately longing for, and where the wife really is the most precious thing to the husband in the whole world - someone worth dying for. The book discussed the different types of love there are, and defined the term 'agape' love as being foundational to any marriage. This book

truly got my attention, and led to me reading my new Bible even more. Like Todd, pretty soon I was devouring all the wisdom and knowledge I could get from studying Scripture, attending church, and praying. Todd began coming to church with me and eventually we joined a beginner Bible class and were married. The rest of the story can be found dovetailed with Todd's testimony in the previous chapter so I will end my part here and we can get back to our first day in Jerusalem!

## Chapter Nineteen

### Southern Steps and The Jewish Quarter

Our group left the Garden of Gethsemane following a Bible study pertaining to the site which focused on the following passage: *Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch." He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."* (Mark 14:32-36) We took short rest room break, and then began making our way further down Palm Sunday Road to a much larger, busier thoroughfare where our bus was waiting for us. We boarded and after a short drive pulled up near an entrance in the Old City walls where we filed out of the bus. People were bustling about up and down the walkways and a multitude of vendors were selling souvenir trinkets, post cards and cashmere scarves. The crowds were a varied mix of tourists, Israeli soldiers, and a plethora of local vendors and residents - mostly Arabs, Armenians, and Jews - going about their daily business.

As I noticed a table stacked high with freshly baked breads for sale, I found myself deeply fascinated by the dynamic nature and vibrancy of this city called Jerusalem, where abundant activity seemed to be continually unfolding before my eyes. Action, energy, and purpose flourished in every direction and on every level.



Around the corner as we continued walking, I noted several young soldiers carrying large weapons strolling casually about – an intriguing yet necessary facet of Jerusalem life to which we would quickly become accustomed. At the same time, we suddenly heard music and loud singing breaking forth ahead of us. There was indeed a parade of formally dressed people walking, shouting, singing, laughing, playing

instruments, and carrying a young boy in a strange looking carriage contraption. Our guide allowed us to pause and observe while informing us we were seeing a Bar Mitzvah celebration. Candy was being thrown up high into the air while horns and drums played a celebratory beat and melody. It was quite a scene! The festivity known as Bar Mitzvah (or Bat Mitzvah for girls) is a major party and life event held for every Jewish child who turns the age of 12 and thereby is considered fully accountable for decisions and actions. Most importantly, it is also at this age when young boys are deemed ready to observe religious precepts and participate with the men in public worship within the Jewish synagogues. In Jerusalem, it is extremely common to observe several Bar Mitzvahs in one day as various local families utilize the Temple Mount area and Western Wall access to proclaim the occasion. Specific days of the week are set aside for these celebrations and our group was lucky enough to be in the vicinity on one of those appropriated days. It was such a fun and unexpected surprise, and we greatly enjoyed the novel experience.

Our pastor then led us toward a location known as the 'Southern Steps' of the Temple Mount. These ancient stairs were a main entry into the outer courts of the temple before it was destroyed. The steps were unearthed in excavations done in 1967 and it is widely accepted this stone staircase was walked upon by Jesus in His day, and He likely would have stood here teaching and challenging pharisees and scribes on

several occasions. It was difficult for me to capture an unfettered view of the area with my camera because tourists ceaselessly congregated and wandered as various church groups flowed in and out, but I did my best. Much of the steps are now fortified and renovated to make it safe for groups and tourists to sit or walk upon them, but one can also still see the older, more crumbled steps which have been purposely left untouched.



Partial View of Southern Steps

After another personal testimony given by someone in the group, we sang worship songs and held a Bible study pertinent to the location. *So, they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"* And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. (Mark 11:15-18)

It was amazing to think money changing tables and doves would have been sold on or near this very spot to those who wanted to enter and make their offerings to God. With minds blown and hearts overwhelmed, we somewhat contemplatively made our way to the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. Here we were allowed to roam freely for a while and grab ourselves some lunch. Todd and I continued to be intrigued by the cultural nuances and uniquely Jewish elements of the teeming environment around us. Musicians played instruments on various platforms and corners of cobbled walkways and staircases. Rabbis shuffled busily past while their cohorts shooed people away from standing or walking too close to them. Orthodox Jews in full dress strode through the streets amidst their secular counterparts while Arabic residents conducted their daily life's

business right alongside them. Peppered throughout the entire city were hundreds of Israeli soldiers and police, vigilantly monitoring all activities to ensure peace and safety. American, Asian, African, Central and South American, and European tourist groups wandered through, some with rather dazed expressions, but most just excitedly looking around as their respective guides walked backwards toting flags on sticks for identification, were ceaselessly speaking to them about their surroundings. We passed a man sitting on a random plastic chair at the bottom of a narrow stone staircase, clearly reading his Old Testament Bible. I surreptitiously snuck a photograph of him and captured his classic, iconic pose, which, to me, strongly portrays a distinctive aspect of Jerusalem's character as the city of God.





Eventually, we arrived at a beautiful, courtyard-like town square in the middle of the Jewish Quarter, and noticed an inviting outdoor patio filled with dining tables, flowers, and cheerful umbrellas. Savoring the delightful aromas of lunch being cooked, served, and enjoyed by many, Todd and I quickly sought out a large table at which several in our group joined us while the rest wandered off in search of something different. After ordering a round of mint-infused lemonades and an assortment of falafels, pizza, and pastas, we settled in and rested our weary feet while awaiting our meal. It was such a pleasant place to relax yet still be in the thick of activity as we observed Old City life thrive throughout the open, bustling square. Art shops, antique shops, souvenir stores, bakeries, juice stands, pizza bistros, and falafel huts lined the area and its branching streets. At one point, I noticed a tall, lanky man lazily stretch out across a bench and light a cigarette. Once again, I found myself sneaking a picture to capture the moment.



Lunch in the Jewish Quarter at Tisherat Street



Lunch that day was absolutely delectable, especially as I am of the opinion all food tastes exponentially better when eaten outdoors! After paying the bill we walked a few blocks to meet up with the rest of the group near the Temple Mount Institute, where the next appointment was to be. Inside, we were sternly instructed to refrain from using cameras, so I do not have pictures of this visit. We all sat down on benches and soon a rabbi came out to share with us all he could about the passionate goal of the Temple Mount Institute, which was that of building a new temple and outfitting it according to the Scriptures, just as it used to be. He excitedly explained the progress the institute was making with regard to recreating every item listed in the Bible for service in the temple and we were then shown several of the items which were behind lock and key in display cabinets throughout the building. It was a remarkably interesting view into the heart of the God-ordained Old Testament Jewish ceremonial practices and related accoutrements. Once we had finished milling about to examine the beautiful displays showcasing ephods with rare gems, candelabras, cups, basins, and the like, we were invited to explore the attached gift shop which was outfitted with numerous books, Bibles, maps, and a plethora of tourist memorabilia.

We finally left the Temple Mount Institute and our guide then directed us to another entrance just a short distance down the street. This site was known as the 'Burnt House'. We were taken into a darkened

room in order to view a video depicting a reenactment of how things may have unfolded for one particular family during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. when both the city of Jerusalem and the temple were burned to the ground. After the dramatic video, we were led down several stairs to a level below the city and shown the remains of several rooms of a house from that era, which had been excavated under the current day streets of Jerusalem. It was possible to see the remnants of mosaic tiled floors, archaeological relics such as pottery and tools, and even areas which clearly used to be baths, having steps entering into deeply carved, tub-sized basins. We were totally fascinated by this underground journey into the past. How amazing it is that we can dig underneath today's city of Jerusalem and find the remains of a whole different world; a long-ago period of history on display right in front of our eyes!

We boarded our bus and eventually arrived at the hotel where we headed to our rooms for a short rest before the group's allotted dinner hour began. Once again, we were offered a colorful and remarkably diverse array of Mediterranean selections, and we filled our stomachs enthusiastically while enjoying the sweet fellowship we had all established with one another. Often, several of us would stay at the tables long after eating, and simply chat for hours before going to bed. As tired as we were, it was so necessary to socialize and reminisce over the things we had each seen or thought about that day; laughing, and joking

around with one another, encouraging each other, and just generally sharing our lives with each other. The familial love we all felt was palpable and overflowing. To this day, Todd and I agree we have never experienced anything like the bonding which takes place during an Israel Bible Study Tour.

## Chapter Twenty

### Temple Mount and City of David

Morning brought an earlier than usual wake-up call, due to the need to arrive early enough at the Temple Mount so our group's place in line would not be too far back. The hours allocated for tourism access on the Mount itself were quite limited and many groups often purposefully arrived hours before the gates even opened. Our breakfast slightly hurried, we quickly boarded the bus and rolled out onto the already bustling street as the morning Psalm was read and prayers made for the day.

Thankfully, the line was not terribly long when we arrived, and soon enough we were through the gates and security checkpoints; alighting the staircase to enter the outer courts of the massive Temple Mount. The size of the Temple Mount's elevated plaza above the Western Wall was quite overwhelming once we physically stood upon the location. It covers approximately 37 acres at an elevation of 2,428 feet above sea level. Our group wandered slowly about the area in somewhat of an awestruck silence, as we imagined what it would have looked like before the Temple itself was destroyed in 70 A.D. Now empty, quiet, and desolate - with the exception of select tour groups respectfully milling about - it was difficult to picture the place filled with Levitical priests, scribes and pharisees, sacrificial animals, and a plethora of

Jewish people praying, worshipping, and observing their rituals and customs. It must have been an incredibly vibrant, dramatic, even noisy, and somewhat mystical daily scene, with the fires upon the altar and smoke ceaselessly rising up to the heavens. There would have been unending activity involving the blood of animal sacrifices, purification rituals and water basins, the playing of musical instruments, Scripture recitations, private and public prayers, and singing of psalms. We wondered what it had felt like for those who lived far away to make the pilgrimage here three times a year for the required feasts and sacrifices. According to the Bible God's Presence had dwelt in His holy Temple and His people continually worshipped Him in this place. It was a fascinating thing to contemplate.

In our era, sadly enough, Bibles were forbidden at this site, so our pastor simply had us gather around while we quietly discussed our surroundings, and he mentioned several places in Scripture directly relevant to the Temple Mount. We had no idea as we departed the area that in years to come, more often than not, church tour groups would no longer have access to visit the Temple Mount plaza due to increased religious and political angst, tightened rules, and restrictions. It was truly a blessing for our group to experience such a peaceful and lengthy visit that year. From there, we made our way on foot to the next site on the schedule, which was the City of David. This location featured an ongoing archeological excavation

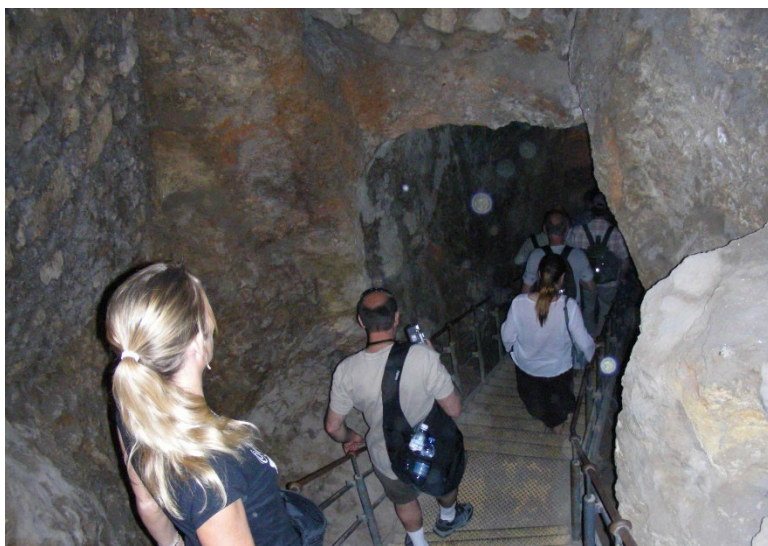
and a museum building open to the public for touring. We watched a short video and then climbed up to a lookout point from which we could see the borders of the original Jebusite settlement which had eventually become the City of David after the Israelites conquered the area, as well as the location for King David's palace. A short shopping spree was allowed at the gift shop nearby, where I remember purchasing a small, brown, stoneware pot which had a handle on one side and an intriguingly shaped spout on the other - it appeared to me that its purpose was possibly to hold olive oil. Regardless, I was drawn to its simpleness of character and eventually I placed it on display in one of the library shelves at my home office. Our shopping complete, the group took a well-earned restroom break and also made a quick and rewarding cappuccino stop.

Afterward, we gathered around again and began looking more in depth at the plethora of viewable excavations, while our guide discussed what had been found thus far in the City of David, who was leading the work, and what the hopes of the archaeology team were. We did learn the most important impetus was to reveal David's actual palace ruins, which the researchers felt they were beginning to stumble upon as they continued to clear ground. We all gave a curious glance at the various tented ongoing excavations dotting the hillside - the work being hidden from our sight by tarps - before we started climbing down a spiral staircase to the entrance of what was known as Hezekiah's Tunnel. This tunnel

was basically a water channel which had been carved beneath the City of David by King Hezekiah and which allowed for the city to have access to the Gihon Spring located outside the city walls, especially during times of war and siege. The tunnel leads from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam. Our group was given the choice of walking one of two paths; a higher portion of the tunnel which remained free of water yet followed along with the lower portion, or the lower tunnel, which required tourists to walk in water up to their waists at times. Todd and I chose the dry route and at the end of the tunnel, the group (some of them quite wet but feeling rather accomplished) regathered at the Pool of Siloam for a Bible study on the following passage:

*Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam". So, he went and washed, and came back seeing. Therefore, the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?" Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he." Therefore, they said to him, "How were your eyes*

*opened?" He answered and said, "A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So, I went and washed, and I received sight." Then they said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know." (John 9:1-12)*



Entering King Hezekiah's Tunnel

We waited a moment while those in the group who needed to, changed into dry clothing at a nearby restroom, and then we left the site. It was lunch time, so our bus dropped the group off near one of Jerusalem's Old City gates. From there, our pastor and the Israeli guide led us to a quaint little Armenian-owned restaurant where we all filed in and sat at numerous small tables, virtually filling the place up.

The walls were bedecked in red striped blankets, lending to the atmosphere a rather cheerful ambiance. The lunch options we were given consisted of cheese pizza, chicken shawarma with pita bread, or schnitzel with pita. Everyone ordered freshly squeezed lemonade with crushed mint leaves, as our host proudly proclaimed it was his mother's recipe and we would be utterly remiss if we did not try it. Dessert was also available, consisting of assorted honey-soaked baklava options. Todd and I happily purchased several!



## Chapter Twenty-One

### Western Wall and Pools of Bethesda

Once our bellies were full and the bills paid, we left the restaurant and walked through the Armenian Quarter, eventually making our way to the infamous Western Wall. The group went through a security check gate and the men were required to put on hats or yarmulkas in order to respect the Jewish religious head covering requirements.

Upon entering the large, wide-open area filled with tourists, soldiers, and a vast number of the local religious Jewish population, we simply stood and paused for a bit, to take it all in. Those who were there for religious reasons were gathered against the wall, some holding prayer books, heads bobbing back and forth with eyes closed, as they prayed their petitions to God at the only remnant of the Temple Mount to which they were allowed regular access, the Western or Wailing Wall.

Meanwhile, numerous soldiers stood or walked throughout the area, most of them in small groups of twos and threes. In one place, a rather large cluster of young female soldiers were gathered in a spot, holding their automatic rifles, and listening to their instructor, as they were clearly on some sort of training visit. In Israel, aside from a few very specific religious exemptions, young men must serve in the military for

3 years upon reaching the age of 18 years old, and for young women the requirement is to serve for 2 years. In this way, almost every Israeli adult becomes a trained soldier, regardless of what they choose to do the rest of their adult life – and in times of war, anyone can then be called to duty to defend their nation if necessary. It is quite an amazing system and breeds within every Israelite a sense of patriotism and protection for their land and the people living in it.





Western Wall



Gathering together once again, our group entered a nearby doorway, and we were ushered down a staircase to begin a tour of the Rabbinical Tunnel, which essentially is an excavated space underground following along the Temple Mount Western Wall, revealing street level stones and structures which would have been utilized and walked upon during the times of King Herod and Jesus. The very first item of import we were shown was a massive stone in the lower wall having a length of 45 feet, a height of 9.8 feet, and an estimated width of 11 to 15 feet deep. Scholars reckon its weight at approximately 520 metric tons. It was intriguing to try and imagine how this stone was lifted into place without powered machinery.

We then were led into an extremely narrow and somewhat dark passage, with lights periodically placed so the architectural features and bedrock areas could be seen. Every once in a while, a plexiglass plate was strategically placed on the floor, through which one could peer down at even deeper excavations and older ruins within crevices below. I truly felt like we were exploring a cave, and yet my brain was forced to realize the level on which we were walking used to be an open-air surface of Jerusalem where people conducted daily business in more ancient times. Needless to say, the experience was surreal. Every once in a while we were directed to look up at a set of Roman arches or a partially revealed column. There were also several cisterns to be seen which formerly

gave households of that period access to water. In one of the excavated alcoves along the tunnel was a small bench next to a plaque which taught of the features of Herodian masonry. King Herod had every massive stone he built with, engraved with a beveled border line all along its edges so people would know what structures were constructed specifically by his direct order and during his reign. Todd and I took a moment to sit down and have a picture taken of us so we would always remember we walked on the same level of streets in Jerusalem that Jesus would have walked.



Rabbinical Tunnels beneath the Western Wall (2006)

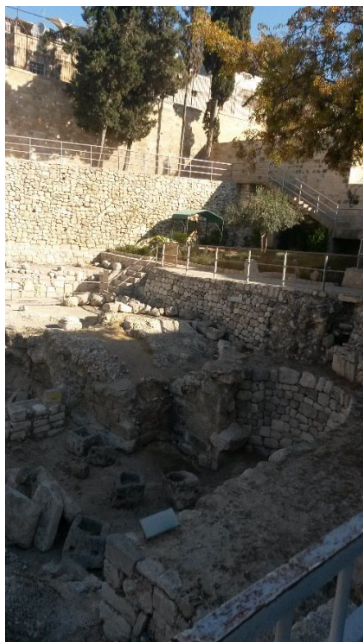


We finally reached the end of the long, deep, narrow tunnel and walked out into daylight, which was refreshingly welcome. What an experience! To this day, I am utterly fascinated by the layers and layers of archeological remains which are existent underneath the modern-day cities in Israel. The ancient history and tangible, archaeological evidence so prominent and unique to this land is truly unlike any other place on earth.

The next site on our schedule was also located in the Old City, near the Christian Quarter and known as the St. Ann Church, which sits next to the archaeological remains of the biblically referenced pools of Bethesda. Our guide explained to us the St. Ann Church was one of the few remaining Crusader Era churches left in the city because most of them had been destroyed by a Muslim military campaign led by Saladin in approximately 1187 A.D. Because an inscription on the outer wall of the church proclaimed the building was being utilized as an Islamic educational institution, the church was miraculously left alone and kept intact. The acoustics of the church are what make it renowned to this day and most tourist groups are brought here to sing one or two songs within, in order to experience the amazing sound of their own acapella voices bouncing and reverberating in an almost haunting yet beautiful way. Our pastor led us in a worship and praise song and the effect was quite astounding. Our little group sounded like a professional choir! Upon leaving the quaint church we

rounded the corner and found ourselves face to face with the Pools of Bethesda and its 5 porches, just as the Scriptures describe. We gathered for a short Bible study on John 5:1-9, as follows:

*After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath. (John 5:1-9)*



St. Ann's Church (top), Pools of Bethesda (bottom)

Daylight was beginning to wane as we finished up our study. All were eager to get to the bus and return to the hotel for a bit of a rest and then dinner. It had been another long, busy, and yet incredibly rewarding day filled with the making of new memories which would last a lifetime. Todd and I went up to our hotel room and relaxed a bit before freshening up and going to dinner. We browsed the hotel gift shops a little bit beforehand and found ourselves in an art store which had several paintings for sale, done by local artists. We became enamored with two of the paintings and ended up purchasing both, making arrangements for the pieces to be shipped to our home in Wisconsin, since we did not have room in our luggage for them. To this day, the small paintings hang on the walls in our hearth room where we read our Bibles every morning; a sweet reminder of our very first Israel tour. I gaze at them often and with great fondness.

We enjoyed a wonderful and filling dinner with our group once again, and talked late into the evening as we discussed the day's events and anything else that came to mind. Finally, we stumbled up to our rooms for the night and fell asleep the moment our heads hit the pillows.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Free Day

Morning quickly found us as crisp, cooler air wafted in through our balcony door while impatient horns honked amidst the lively activity of Jerusalem traffic far below. This day was to be somewhat of a 'Free Day' in the sense that our guide had no reservations or official appointments for the group which we needed to observe. Therefore, our pastor had determined we would buy tickets to walk the upper ramparts of a large portion of the Old City Walls. We met on a corner near the entrance to the "Rampart Walk" and sat down for coffee at a convenient outdoor café prior to the adventure.

Throughout the tour thus far, I had witnessed many locals ordering and drinking Turkish coffee at a variety of locations. Curious, Todd and I decided to try it this particular morning. We each ordered and received a small glass cup filled to the brim with dark, steaming and somewhat spiced-smelling coffee. I was so excited to try it and truly hoping I had discovered an exotic new way to enjoy coffee. I took a sip and to my great displeasure, found it to be quite thick and grainy on the tongue. While the flavor was not exactly terrible, it also was not that great. The texture and flavor actually bothered me so much that after a few more tentative slurps, I gave up and ordered a cappuccino instead! Todd finished the remainder of

my cup of Turkish coffee and then ordered himself a cappuccino as well. It is always amusing to attempt something new, so I am glad we did it, but spiced Turkish coffee is not a beverage I plan to order again any time soon! After some enjoyable time lounging and sipping our hot beverages while some of us people-watched and others read the newspaper, we finally got up and readied ourselves for a vigorous morning hiking endeavor around Jerusalem's Old City walls.



Morning Coffee Before Walking The Wall Ramparts



Crossing the street, we paid for entry at a small ticket window and soon found ourselves climbing stone steps leading toward the upper Wall Ramparts. We were moving at a rather brisk pace in the somewhat chilly air, and it felt great. Every so often, we would stop and take in the view of various parts of the city. The walkway took us past places which overlooked the small patios of private homes and cluttered backyards often containing a variety of potted plants, laden clotheslines, and the occasional cat lazing in the sunshine. At one point, two adorable little boys came running out into their yard, waving at us and shouting “Shalom! Shalom!” We laughed and waved back, greeting them in like manner. As we continued onward, reaching an overlook platform, we

found ourselves pausing to gaze down at a very crowded street market below. Multitudes of people walked to and fro amidst piles of vegetables, fruits, tapestries, and various other wares. Our pastor told us we were actually standing on top of the Damascus Gate. It was quite enthralling to watch the busy mass of activity below us. I felt as though I were playing a part in one of the Indiana Jones movies, as the area reminded me of the market square where Indiana Jones frantically makes his way through busy streets such as the one we were looking at, toppling over carts, baskets, and fruit stands as he tries to get away from the bad guys.

We finally completed our rampart walk and then turned back around so we could travel down a staircase which brought us to street level at the Damascus Gate. We followed that particular street into the Old City, passing through an open-air produce market, and a multitude of fascinating shops on a darkened and often tent-covered cobbled street filled with people from every walk of life. We saw fruit stands, leather stores, souvenir and junk shops, antique dealers, art dealers, jewelry stores, a hammered silver mercantile, and spice sellers. Juice stands, coffee counters, candy stores and clothing shops were in vast supply. Store owners who were not busy were standing at the entrances of their properties calling out to everyone passing by and inviting them to take a look at their wares. It was a crowded, jam-packed, street of activity and I was somewhat relieved

when we finally came into an open square which found us entering the Jewish Quarter once again.





Jewish boys yelling “Shalom!” to our group.



Views from Wall Ramparts



Standing above Damascus Gate



Street level at Damascus Gate & Old City Shopping





In search of lunch, the group split up to find whatever suited their appetite that afternoon. Todd and I discovered an inviting restaurant with outdoor seating and the fantastic scent of grilled and deep-fried food emanating from within. We sat down and ordered a falafel and fries with a bottle of water and a cup of cappuccino for dessert. After eating our delicious meal and relaxing for a time, we ventured out and visited several nearby stores and gift shops, running into some of our other group members here and there periodically, as they did their own browsing and shopping. It was really a lovely way to spend the sunny afternoon. Eventually the entire group met up at a predetermined time and location, and from there our bus rolled up and we boarded.

The last stop of the day was to be a large, tented marketplace where we could observe a whole different level of shopping in Jerusalem but outside of the Old City. We were dropped off on a busy looking street corner and then entered a vast market which was filled with everything from freshly caught fish still occasionally flopping on ice-filled tables, to shoes, to a stand offering deep-fried donuts – an aroma most of us immediately caught wind of and drifted toward. The delicious fragrance was tantalizing in the steadily dropping temperature of late afternoon air, so Todd and I patiently waited in line to purchase the warm, pungently yeasty, and sugary delight. I can tell you in all honesty that it was the best tasting donut I ever ate in my entire life!

Once the bakery treat was successfully eaten we began briskly walking the rest of the aisles in the market, exclaiming at the plethora of unique booths and stands containing interesting foods, trinkets, and supplies, while rubbing our hands together as we grew chillier and chillier. Locals and tourists alike swarmed the marketplace area. Sellers hawked their wares as we strolled by their tables. As thrilling as this market was, I found myself quite relieved when we finally reached the end and met up with the bus, because I had definitely grown quite cold. We climbed into the warm coach and headed to the hotel where we had a few hours to relax before dinner with the group.

Todd and I took the opportunity to call room service and order a bottle of red wine with a plate of cheeses to enjoy together in our room, as we warmed our chilled bodies and caught up with the news on the television. Our eyes suddenly began widening in shock as we watched the tv screen. It was being reported that a Russian secret agent, Alexander Litvinenko was hospitalized and basically perishing on camera in front of the whole world, having been poisoned with a lethal dose of polonium-210 which caused acute radiation syndrome. I will always remember following the film footage of him from our Jerusalem hotel room. He looked frighteningly pale and was rapidly wasting away in a hospital bed as the chemical destroyed his body from within. It truly was an alarming thing to observe a man who was clearly a vibrant and healthy person only days before,

transform into a fading, frail, dying shell of himself in such a short time – and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Memories of his pallid face and haunted, hopeless expression have always stayed with me. The news event was an upsettingly strange and unique facet of our first Israel trip never to be forgotten by either one of us. The poor man died within 3 weeks of the poisoning.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Shepherds' Fields, Elah Valley, and Ashkelon

The next morning, our group climbed aboard the bus and headed out of town toward the first destination of the day, the Elah Valley. The biblical account of David fighting the Philistine giant, Goliath, took place in the Elah Valley. Rays of cheery, morning sunshine were quickly warming the air as we eventually pulled off the highway and parked seemingly in the middle of nowhere on the graveled shoulder. The group gathered together outside the bus while traffic whizzed by, and our pastor began to point to the open fields in front of us. He explained the whole area was the Elah Valley and then gestured toward two mountainous ranges on opposing sides of the valley, explaining the Philistine army would have been on the one side, while the Israelites would have camped on the other; with both armies intending to meet in middle of the valley between to do battle.

There was not a formal park or tourist building of any sort at this particular site, so we simply grabbed our Bibles and a bottle of water and began walking toward the Israelite side of the valley as we followed our pastor toward a few shade trees situated at the base of the hill. Upon approach, we noticed a dry creek bed following the length of the hill range and further inspection revealed multitudes of water-smoothed stones scattered along the bed as far as the eye could

see. We were encouraged to find a few small, rounded stones and put them into our pockets as free souvenirs, considering they were probably in the likeness and size of what David would have picked up and put into his sling to kill Goliath thousands of years ago. It was absolutely mind blowing to think the area had remained so untouched and unchanged since the time of David, even down to the presence of the creek bed from which stones could be retrieved. We sang a worship song and listened to another personal testimony given by a group member. Then Bibles were opened to take in a study relevant to our location. The passages covered were the following:

*And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered together, and they encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in battle array against the Philistines. The Philistines stood on a mountain on one side, and Israel stood on a mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. And a champion went out from the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. And he had bronze armor on his legs and a bronze javelin between his shoulders. Now the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his iron spearhead weighed six hundred shekels; and a shield-bearer went before him.*

*Then he stood and cried out to the armies of Israel, and said to them, "Why have you come out to line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul?"*

*Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." And the Philistine said, "I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.*

*Now David was the son of that Ephrathite of Bethlehem Judah, whose name was Jesse, and who had eight sons... Then he [David] took his staff in his hand; and he chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in a shepherd's bag, in a pouch which he had, and his sling was in his hand. And he drew near to the Philistine. So the Philistine came, and began drawing near to David, and the man who bore the shield went before him. And when the Philistine looked about and saw David, he disdained him; for he was only a youth, ruddy and good-looking. So the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!" Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the*

*LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands." So it was, when the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, that David hurried and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. But there was no sword in the hand of David. (1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17:2-50)*

After the study was completed, we began the trek back across the field toward the waiting bus. We drove a short while and then pulled into a rough looking parking lot which appeared to be surrounded by many archaeological formations scattered about the area. Bibles and water bottles in hand once again, we traveled a narrow path until we reached the top of a small hill where a low wall provided us with a place to sit. Our pastor informed us the site and surrounding areas were actually the original locations of 5 Philistine cities; Ashdod, Gath, Ekron, Ashkelon, and Gaza. It was somewhere near here that the Ark of the Covenant was captured and kept by the Philistines for 7 months, resulting in God striking the cities' inhabitants with tumors and great destruction until they returned the Ark to the Israelites. This historical account can be found in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 4:2-6:18. We enjoyed a short study and then boarded the bus again to drive to a kibbutz where we were scheduled to have lunch. After satisfying our hungry stomachs and taking a rest room

break we began our journey back toward Jerusalem with one last stop on the schedule; the Shepherd's Fields, outside of Bethlehem.

Upon arrival, we parked on the side of the street and walked through a stony-looking area strewn with rubbish and debris. Our pastor and the Israeli guide led us along a somewhat unkempt, scruffy-looking, rocky path, until we reached an overlook point from which many acres of terraced, grazing hills and fields could be seen. The numerous white buildings of Bethlehem could also be viewed, quaintly cresting the slopes in the distance. Large rocks jutted from the earth everywhere we looked, amidst several stone, shelf-like ledges, and thus we each tried to find a passably comfortable place to sit as our worship leader pulled out his guitar.

After the group finished singing, our pastor began to teach about the site. It was in these fields where David tended the flocks of his father's sheep and was eventually anointed the next king of Israel by the prophet Samuel. (See 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 16:1-13). Also, in these very fields Ruth gleaned from the crops of Boaz and fell in love with her kinsman redeemer. (See Ruth 1:1-4:22) Finally, it was somewhere in these fields, where shepherds were watching their sheep when suddenly angels came forth announcing the birth of the world's Savior, the promised Messiah, Jesus. (See Luke 2:1-14)

The pastor taught on all three of these sections of Scripture; specifically with regard to how Boaz redeemed Ruth's mother-in-law's fields in order to get her as his bride, just as Jesus redeemed the whole earth by giving up His deity and then His life, in order to get those of us who would believe in Him as His own eternal bride. This act of love and redemption pattern is succinctly described in the following parable: *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13:44)*

During the study, a shepherd family and their flock of goats began climbing the rocky hill toward our group. When they finally reached us, our pastor paused for a few moments and allowed us to take pictures of the goats and drop a shekel or two in the children's hands to thank them for their time and unique photography opportunity. Waving goodbye, they then made their way back to their home which was settled into one of the distant hills. Seeing the goats and small family was a sweet addition to our experience in the Shepherds' Fields. Finally, we got back on the bus and rode to the Jerusalem hotel for the evening, enjoying the usual fantastic buffet fare and fellowship before turning in for the night. It was a bittersweet evening, though, because the next day was to be the very last one of our sojourn in Israel.



A Shepherd family and their goats in the fields of Bethlehem

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Museum Day

Morning broke on our final day in Israel. The first rays of sunlight began crawling across our hotel room as we awakened to the increasingly active sounds drifting in from the streets below. Israeli drivers have an extreme propensity for honking as a routine form of vehicular communication, and we had become quite accustomed to the noisy din rising up through the open door on our beloved little angular balcony. This last dawn in Jerusalem weighed heavily upon our hearts as we readied ourselves for breakfast. My mind was swimming with the onslaught of the past two weeks' worth of experiences and information. Additionally, I could not quite get a handle on the idea we would soon be home and life would inevitably go back to its normal pattern. I did know one thing; I would never be the same person I was before the tour. This trip had forever changed me in ways I had yet to experience, and the knowledge of that fact was overwhelming.

We met up with our group in the hotel restaurant and enjoyed one last Israeli breakfast together, lingering long over coffee and discussing our various, personal highlights of the trip thus far, while, at the same time, looking forward immensely to the morning's agenda, with the first stop being the Israel Museum and Shrine of the Book. We boarded the bus,

and it was not long before we arrived at our initial destination. Restroom breaks were taken, we filed into a large, open courtyard which housed a massive model of Jerusalem in the Second Temple period, with the Temple Mount and Herod's Temple still standing. We were told the model scale was 50:1, and covered nearly an acre, with a meticulously detailed re-creation of architectural and topographical features. The model was a fascinating thing to behold, and we spent quite a bit of time examining it from every angle as the group was led around the entire display while the guide animatedly discussed the various locations of specific buildings and relevant aspects of the original city.

After we finished viewing the model, we were led into a building with a very strange, mushroom-shaped roof. Our guide explained it was made to look like the top of a clay jar which would typically hold ancient scrolls of Scripture. This building was known as the "Shrine of the Book" and housed multitudes of ancient Bible scrolls as well as several replicas of the Scriptures which were found in the Dead Sea caves. The group broke apart and spread out in order to view the many glassed-in cases housing the scrolls and related artifacts on their own. It was an enlightening experience, and we all left the museum with a better understanding of what authentic, biblical scrolls really look like, the varying conditions of the numerous fragments and pieces which were able to be salvaged and restored, as well as the magnitude of how many scrolls actually existed, including the proven evidence

of their ages and uniformity between manuscript copies. We returned to the bus and headed to the second stop of the day; a museum site called Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem is known as “The World Holocaust Remembrance Center” and is located on the western slope of Mount Herzl, in western Jerusalem. This museum was established in 1953 with the purpose of making sure such an event as the holocaust would be regularly remembered so it would never happen again. The Israelis have a saying which refers to the holocaust, and it is simply, “Never Again.” Foreign diplomats and political visitors to the nation of Israel are typically required to visit Yad Vashem at least once during their stay so as to absorb personally, the terrible history the Jewish people have endured, and to be sufficiently warned, lest such a thing ever be threatened again upon ANY people group.

The Yad Vashem complex features a small, darkened, underground building at its entrance. We were told by our guide that at the center of this chamber stood 5 solitary candles, reflected by hundreds of mirrors placed at varying angles along the walls and ceiling. This intentionally created the effect of a night sky filled with twinkling stars. 1.5 million separate points of light flickered in the darkness, serving as a memorial to the 1.5 million children who were murdered during the holocaust. As we walked through the darkened building, following a mounted railing along the wall, an audio recording continually and methodically spoke the name and age of each child

killed, and where they were from. This recording is spoken in both English and Hebrew, perpetually starting over again once the list reaches its end of names. Outside, throughout the grounds, a number of memorial stones could be found along beautiful, parklike terraces and paths, each of them containing the name of any prominent person who risked their own lives by helping the Jews during the holocaust. A large Visitor Center provided tourists with access to restrooms, cafeterias, meeting areas and a bookstore. We passed through the building to another set of doors which brought us outside again, and there we found ourselves strolling along a broad walkway lined with trees, which eventually led us to a much larger building sporting a steep, V-shaped roofline.

This was the most prominent part of Yad Vashem. An exceptionally spacious gallery greeted us, boasting soaring ceilings and numerous, open rooms which were placed skillfully along a hallway, each leading from one area to the next. The hallway was set up to guide visitors on a long and difficult journey through chambers which displayed the multitudes of often horrific photographs, videos, and testimonies of the holocaust period, as well as the innumerable relics and artifacts of the era. These displays varied between showcasing such items as the shoes, clothing, books, jewelry, and household belongings taken from the concentration camp prisoners to the SS uniforms, weapons, train cars, record books, and a plethora of other devices employed by the Nazis in the camps.

The amount of recovered materials relating to the holocaust at this location is so vast, it would literally take a person many, many days to virtually sift through and examine every piece and part of it all. Walking through this exhibit was emotionally draining, sobering, heart wrenching, sickening, devastating, and frightening. To see the colossal depth of evil maliciously practiced toward the Jewish people in such a widespread attempt to accomplish mass genocide was beyond heinous. Todd and I actually only took about 2 hours to walk through the gallery, becoming so overwhelmed by the seemingly unending, torturous, and murderous acts depicted, we purposefully sped up our progress near the end of the tour. We simply could no longer take in any further information.

As I previously mentioned, there was a bright and lively cafeteria and coffee shop on the grounds, as well as a unique bookstore. We shopped for a bit and then entered the cafeteria area for a bite to eat. It was here our group was directed to gather together again, once we finished going through the exhibits and bookstore. Todd and I ordered tuna sandwiches and cappuccinos, sitting down to quietly eat and reflect on what we had just experienced. One by one, various members of our group began showing up. Each of them ordered their own lunches, joining us at our table or at other available tables nearby. No one had much to say in light of the innumerable holocaust atrocities

with which we had all become so much more closely acquainted in the past several hours.

An outdoor deck wrapped around the building just outside the cafeteria windows, so after finishing our sandwiches, Todd and I walked outdoors to enjoy the lovely blue sky, picturesque hillside views, and crisp, fresh air while sharing a piece of pie and sipping the rest of our coffee. While I was grateful for this unique opportunity and deeply humbled by such a solemn memorial, I was looking forward to leaving the site. The profound tragedy of unavenged sorrow, and the increased understanding of the unrestrained evil which had reigned freely during the holocaust weighed heavily upon my spirit in this place.

## Chapter 25

### The Garden Tomb and Goodbye

Once our luncheon was complete, we boarded the bus and slowly made our way through busy afternoon traffic to the last site of the day, the Garden Tomb. Stepping off the bus steps, I found myself making a concentrated effort to gather my feelings and thoughts into some semblance of order and focus. I was simultaneously distraught and drained by the Yad Vashem experience, yet filled with overwhelming emotion at the prospect of visiting what was believed to be the location of the tomb where Jesus had been placed after His crucifixion. Our group formed a line outside a stone wall which contained a gated entrance, while the guide checked in with the staff and arranged for our group's appointment to take place.

Numerous street vendors meandered through the narrow, cobbled walkway, hawking their souvenirs at the various tour groups milling about. We finally entered the premises and were directed along a lovely garden path leading to much-needed restrooms. Afterward, we gathered together under an elegant olive tree where our Israeli guide was standing. We were then joined by a small, elderly man wearing a red jacket who introduced himself as Ken, our "Garden Tomb Guide". As the new guide began to speak, it became immediately clear he was of British origin, having a strong, clipped British accent as words

tumbled delightfully and rapidly out of his mouth. We learned the Garden Tomb property was owned by a charitable organization based in the United Kingdom, called The Garden Tomb (Jerusalem) Organization. This group originally purchased the land in 1894 and continually maintains and manages the site through donations and a variety of Christian volunteers hailing from a multitude of diverse locations and countries around the world.

Ken led us along the lovely garden pathway and into an alcove where we could all find a spot to sit on stone benches. He then proceeded to describe to us the multitude of reasons why so many Bible scholars believe we were at the location not only of the tomb where Jesus was placed but also remarkably close to the site of the crucifixion; Golgotha - meaning, 'place of the skull'. Ken pointed toward a daunting cliff face looming right outside of the park which displayed shadowy crevices arranged in such a way that indeed, we were looking at what appeared to be an enormous skull. Due to erosion much of the features had worn away, but our guide informed us that at one point there were up to three different skull formations viewable on the side of that cliff. By 2006, we were able to only discern one primary face with fully formed eye sockets, nose socket and jawline. Ken went on to explain how Jesus was crucified outside the city walls, on a main causeway where He would have been forced to walk and carry His cross from inside the gates to outside the gates, ending up in a location near

Golgotha where He could be publicly tortured and shamed as they crucified Him. Additionally, when He was taken down and brought to a tomb, the Bible describes the tomb as being owned by a rich man, who likely owned much land, gardens, vineyards, and the like. The tomb would also have to be located outside the city walls, and near enough to transport Jesus from the crucifixion site to the grave without much time or trouble. The tomb would have been a cave that had not been used until Jesus was put in it. The site where this tomb was located fit all the biblical parameters given to us in Scripture, including the fact that a wine press and remnants of a vineyard were uncovered here, as well as the fact that though the tomb was large enough to accommodate two bodies, only one side had been cut out to fit the size of a man's body - the other was unused and uncarved.

After absorbing all the information Ken was so gifted in sharing with us, we were then led to another alcove where we were given time to sing worship songs, hear a final testimony from someone in the group. At this time, we were allowed to hold a special, private communion together with wine in tiny, olive wood cups, and a small wafer of bread. It was a beautiful time of worship and remembrance, and we were told we could each keep the olive wood cups as a souvenir. Then we lined up and in twos and threes, we took turns entering the Garden Tomb itself to look upon the two benches inside; one carved out for a body, one not carved. As Todd and I crossed through

the opening and gazed around the small, stone room, we were quite silent. If indeed this was where Jesus had been laid, I simply could not absorb it – yet at the same time I believed it was highly probable. I honestly cannot explain my feelings or thoughts from that visit. It is a personal encounter unique to the individual, and therefore, inexplicable. All I can do is encourage everyone I can to try and make such a visit in order to experience it for themselves.

Todd and I posed outside the tomb for a picture to be taken, and then walked the garden paths awhile in order to explore the wine press and other various features of the parklike setting. A pretty little garden tile at this site stands out clearly in my mind to this day. It reminds us of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cheerful proclamation “He is Risen” echoes through the ages and joyfully offsets the sad conviction of spirit when contemplating the crucifixion of the Son of God. In faith, we understand His death to atone for human rebellion against God was the only way for any of us to be reconciled spiritually to our Creator and be able to live eternally in His Presence. Another decorative tile in the garden proclaims the wonderful truth that Jesus came to be the way, the truth, and the life – everlasting life – to all who would believe in Him. I took a picture of it.



Eventually, we entered the nearby gift shop and bookstore. We were excited to purchase a black and white photo of Golgotha from 1900, which depicted a clear display of the skull in the hillside. I also bought soaps, a map, greeting cards, and olive wood souvenirs. The group gathered on the narrow street outside the shop as we waited on the last stragglers in the checkout line. Several of us bought last minute candy bars, scarves, bookmarks, and postcards from street vendors while we waited. Finally, we were all together and heading to the bus which brought us back to our hotel where we spent some time packing up our belongings and treasures, in preparation for checking out. The group eventually met up with one another in the lobby, suitcases and carry-ons in tow. Our schedule this evening was to drive outside of town for a “Good-bye Dinner” at a nice restaurant and then continue driving to Tel Aviv and the Ben Gurion airport where we would be boarding a late-night flight back to the United States.



Gathering Area and Wine Press at Garden Tomb



Partial Side View of Golgotha



Entrance to the Garden Tomb

Boarding the bus with heavy hearts, we watched Jerusalem slip away as the driver headed toward our last stop of the tour in the fading light of day. Dusk had fallen by the time we walked up to the entrance of a remote yet brightly lit restaurant. We were ushered into our own private section and found several tables already laden with warm pita bread piled high, hummus with olive oil drizzled on top, and a multitude colorful relishes, sauces, and salads. We each found a spot to sit down as the servers began pouring iced lemon water. Our beloved Israeli guide and also our bus driver were seated at the tables with us. They began the evening by giving speeches about their own experience with our group and thanking us for our patronage and the enjoyable time they had spent getting to know us. Then our pastor spoke for a while, recounting the adventures we had, and inviting everyone in the group to each stand up and tell our favorite part of the tour.

We all had an opportunity to speak as we nibbled on appetizers and awaited the main course. I do not remember much of what was said at that dinner, but I do know there were many hearty laughs and the shedding of quite a few tears as well. I do recall when it was my turn to share a favorite experience, I chose to describe how I felt to be on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, an event I will always hold close to my heart. Todd's favorite place was the visit at the Garden of Gethsemane, and he discussed how it affected him so deeply to realize he was standing in the same

gardens where Jesus would have prayed so intensely before He was tortured and killed. Piping hot entrees were eventually served all around, and after the pastor said a thankful prayer, we enjoyed delicious chicken, fish, falafels, and French fries. Once our last supper together was completed and after using the rest rooms, we climbed back on the bus for the long, dark ride to Tel Aviv – each of us silent and wrapped up in our own tremendously emotional thoughts. Finally, the bus arrived at the airport, and we unloaded our belongings, saying a tearful farewell to our faithful bus driver before walking into the terminal. Our much-loved guide placed us in the correct line for obtaining boarding passes and checking our luggage. Then we all hugged him goodbye, and our little group continued on with the arduous process of traveling back home over the next 24 hours.



## Chapter 26

### Epilogue

Fifteen years have passed since that first magical sojourn in the holy land of my King and my God. On one hand, the distance in time is a blessing for me as a writer because during those interim years Todd and I were given six more opportunities to travel to Israel with our pastor, allowing me to gain better understanding as an author to be able to more clearly discuss each site and the biblical references in an instructive and logical manner in this book.

Truly, the first trip was so overwhelming that when we arrived home, Todd and I would sometimes find ourselves confused about which site was what when our pictures were developed. And when friends and family asked us how we liked the tour and questioned us on all the things we saw or the places we had visited, we would often sit dumbfounded and tongue-tied, not knowing quite where to begin or how to respond to their queries. We were still essentially trying to absorb what we had experienced – for months and months! To be frank, I felt like a deer staring into headlights when trying to explain the Israel tour that first year. It was also a full year before I successfully assembled my photographs into an orderly and informative photobook, and even longer before I succeeded in creating a DVD slideshow with music and written descriptions of each photo. I was forced to

remain uncertain about some specific locations and simply had to wing it with regard to a few of the pictures. It was only much later on – seven years later, to be exact – when we finally felt led by the Lord to travel to Israel again. It was during that particular trip Todd and I were both able to begin more fully grasping and successfully memorizing some of the pertinent information and related experiences of all the stops the tour group made. Additional trips sometimes included extra sites, while others would include less as tourism increased, and time constraints became more and more restrictive. The numerous added experiences we enjoyed with the people of Israel, the language, the culture, as well as the exploration of different resorts, shops, and restaurants all certainly contributed toward both of us being able to discuss the tours in a more informative manner as time passed.

On the other hand, fifteen years after the fact, the challenge for me in writing this book was to specifically remember the actual events and timeline of the very first tour in 2006. I no longer have the pamphlet or schedule from that year. And essentially, when the same type of tour is taken multiple times, over a long span of years, it is only natural everything begins to blend together in one's mind. I often found it difficult to separate one trip from another as I worked to share the experiences on each page. The only way for me to truly clarify things was to pore over photographs from each year of travel and pinpoint which people and locations pertained to which tours.

Much time was spent pondering the oldest photographs taken with our 35 mm camera from 2006, and I hope the end result is mostly true to how things unfolded. Only God knows for certain!

Ultimately, what I do know is that very first Bible study tour of Israel forever changed our lives. Not only did our faith become exponentially stronger and richer but we developed a heartfelt, life-long, deep-seated bond of love for the land of Israel, the history of Israel, the people of Israel, and the culture of Israel. We are more confidently passionate about the truths found in God's Word, and we have embedded into our souls the memorable realities of seeing, touching, and wholly experiencing a multitude of biblical locations and tangible artifacts which virtually shout to the world that the Scriptures are truly a living, valid, and powerful manifestation of God and His plan for mankind, from the beginning of time to the end of time. Amen!



*The End*