

WATER, STONES AND BONES

Thoughts on My Pilgrimage to Israel

In June of 1999, the Lord, through my generous husband, allowed me to go as a Pilgrim to the land of Israel. I use the word "pilgrim" purposefully because one cannot just visit Israel as a tourist. There are far more attractive vacation locations if one simply wants to be a tourist. In fact, I would not recommend Israel to someone looking for a restful vacation. With the constant threat of terrorism, the heat, the long lines of pilgrims waiting to see the holy sites, and the sheer exhaustion of trying to see as much as you possibly can in ten days or less, the trip is anything but restful. To truly appreciate Israel, one must go as a pilgrim--one who "makes a journey to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion." (New Webster's Dictionary) For the Christian, as well as the Jew, there is no holier place than the Holy Land.



Barbara Smith and I on top of Megiddo

The nation of Israel is a study in contrasts. Its' geography alone is astounding. In an area the size of some counties in the United States, you will find barren mountains, desert wastelands, majestic, lush mountains with beautiful fertile valleys, coastal plains, fresh water, salt water and dead water! Jews, Christians, Messianic Jews, Catholics, Muslims and Druids all lay claim to the land and some share its' sacred sites. Israel is truly a melting pot with immigrants from all over the world. In the market place or along the streets of the Old City you will hear Hebrew spoken as well as English, Aramaic, Greek, Spanish, French, German, and Dutch, just to name a few. As you travel along its' highways you will come across modern cities, quaint villages, third-world Arab towns, and ancient ruins. You will walk on rocky soil, sandy soil and rich soil and you will understand Jesus' parable of the sower, found in Matthew 13, better than you ever thought possible.



Overlooking the Sea of Galilee on the Mount of Beatitudes



*Barren stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho
The King's Highway*

Water

One thing I learned very quickly on my pilgrimage to the Holy Land was the absolute necessity of water. My arms grew tired of lugging a water bottle everywhere we went but after just a day of touring I realized that I literally would not survive without plenty of water. I was constantly looking for a place to buy more water and eventually learned to fill several jugs at our Kibbutz during breakfast so I could save my money for better things--like lots of souvenirs. I drank more water during my ten days in Israel than I probably have in all of my life!

We know that while the human body can go for days without food, it cannot survive without water but there is nothing like a desert to burn that truth home quickly. I traveled to Israel during the summer months, which most people do not do. There is a reason tours are not normally conducted in the summer--it is hot! Our group traveled south of Jerusalem into the Judean Desert on a very hot day. I have read that temperatures in that area can soar to 130 degrees. I believe it. Masada is an ancient Roman fortress that towers 1,000 feet above the Dead Sea. Herod the Great used it as a retreat from his potentially rebellious subjects. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. the 15,000 Roman soldiers marched to Masada where 1,000 Jewish men, women and children defended this last Jewish stronghold. The Jewish defenders ended their lives rather than endure Roman slavery after successfully holding the fort against the Roman onslaught for many months.

While we rode a cable car to the top of Masada, we had to walk around on top of the fortress and then down the Roman siege ramp. It was so hot, no breeze was blowing and there was no place to cool off for even a few minutes. The heat was like an oven and the glare from the sun overwhelming. We poured water on top of our heads, drank it, refilling our water bottles again and again in an attempt to keep our body temperatures down. Some in our group became ill from the heat. We had a doctor, nurse practitioner, nurses and a paramedic with us but all they could do was administer water. There is no "911" on the top of Masada. I found it ironic that we had such glorious views of the Dead Sea from the top of Masada; it looked so refreshing in the searing heat. But even the Dead Sea would not have been an adequate solution for our heat and thirst.





Salt crystals on the Dead Sea

The Dead Sea is poisonous! It lies at the lowest point on the earth and its' waters are so rich in minerals and salt it would poison the body to drink them. We had fun floating on the water but one cannot swim in the Dead Sea since it is dangerous to get even a drop of the water in your eyes or mouth. While it was fun to bob and float, the water was warm and not very refreshing.

Imagine my delight when after the stark barrenness and heat of the Judean Wilderness we traveled to the Sea of Galilee, located in northern Israel. The landscape all around the Sea of Galilee is dotted with fields of bananas, figs, olives, mangoes, apples, etc. Jesus was from the Galilee and spent a great deal of His time here on earth ministering in that region. This part of Israel is a sheer delight. The cool breezes from the Sea are so refreshing. Never have I felt so at home in any one place than I did sitting by the Sea of Galilee. I did not want to return to my home in the States, this was home in the truest sense. Most of the miracles that Jesus performed were performed around this body of water. The Sea is quite calm in the morning and early afternoon--very much like a lake. But by late afternoon and early evening, the waves start crashing against the shore making the "lake" a beach-lover's delight.



The Jordan River is another very familiar body of water to those who are students of Scripture. The Children of Israel crossed the Jordan River when they entered the Promised Land and conquered Jericho. Jesus went out to where John the Baptist was calling the nation of Israel to repentance and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. One of the highlights of my time in Israel was my own baptism in the Jordan River. While I was baptized as a child, this second baptism meant so much more. Stepping into the murky green water that according to our standards qualifies more as a creek than a river, and going down in the watery grave of believer's baptism was deeply moving. It is a hair-raising, spine-tingling, goose-bump raising experience. This was where Jesus was baptized! What a fitting way to absolutely declare that I will follow Him, no matter what the cost.



In thinking about the water that sustained my life while in Israel and the bodies of water that are so familiar to us who make study of the Word our life's work, I was reminded of the passage of Scripture in John 7:37-39. Jesus issues the invitation, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." Earlier in John He says to the Samaritan woman "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal

life." (John 4:14) We know where we can find the water that will forever quench our thirst and yet aren't we often guilty of drinking from other waters? Just like the Dead Sea water on a hot day, the water the world offers for our soul thirst looks good. It looks refreshing and we long for it. But, it is poison to our souls. The water that Jesus offers is living, not dead, water. One drink is enough to satisfy our souls forever. No need for water jugs, cisterns or wells. One drink is enough. Where are you getting your water from today?

STONES

There are a lot of stones in Israel. The terrain is quite rocky so when you hear of Arabs or Jews throwing stones at one another, remember, they do not have to look hard to find a good sized stone. When we were on the Temple Mount, which of course is under the Muslims' control, I took a picture of a tree that has stones in its' branches. The Arabs keep them there for ready "ammunition" in the event of an altercation with their Jewish brothers.

Of course there are ruins in Israel. Archeological digs are very much in progress and each year new exciting finds are discovered. Whole cities have been excavated. One we visited was Beit Shean, located in the Galilee. During Jesus' time 20,000 people lived in this city, which was one of the 10 most important cities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Beit Shean is home to Israel's best preserved Roman theater which once seated 8,000. Saul and his sons were hung from Beit Shean's walls. The ruins are silent "standing stones" that testify to what was valued by that particular society.

By far, the most significant "stone" structure in Israel is the Western Wall. This "Wailing Wall" as it is sometimes referred to is all that is left of the retaining wall that Herod the Great built around the Temple Mount. When Jerusalem was reunified in the war of 1967, Jewish soldiers approached the wall with great joy and reverence. It was the first time in many centuries that Jews had been allowed near the Wall. For Jews, this is the single most holy place in all of the world. It is all they have left of the Temple. The Temple Mount is controlled by the Muslims and Jews are only allowed on the mount at certain hours on specific days of the week. There is much oppression of Jews and Christians on the Temple Mount. When we were there our guides cautioned us against even opening our Bibles or moving our lips as though in silent prayer. The authorities have been known to arrest and torture those who dare to pray or read the Holy Scriptures on the Temple Mount. What an affront this must be to the Most Holy God!



On our first excursion into the Old City of Jerusalem we went to the Wall. Words cannot express my sense of awe and reverence. The Wall is massive. Green vines grow from the crevices in the stones and birds nest there as well. Hundreds of little folded pieces of paper are stuffed in the cracks and crevices and litter the floor in front of the Wall. These are prayers left by Pilgrims who believe that angels take them directly to heaven. Men and women are segregated at the Wall. The men have a much larger space to the left with desks and chairs, while the women have a smaller space to the right. Guards ensure that everyone who approaches the Wall is appropriately attired. For women that means knees and shoulders must be covered and for men, a kippa is required. When we were there on the Sabbath we also were required to hide any jewelry that depicted a cross on it.

The presence of the Lord is so strong at the Wailing Wall. This area is the only place on the earth that God's Shekinah glory once dwelt. 2 Chronicles 5:13-14; 6:36-42; 7:1-3 records Solomon's dedication of the Temple. The Shekinah presence of the Lord so filled the Temple that the priests could not perform their service; fire came from heaven and consumed the sacrifices and the glory of the Lord so filled the Temple that the priests could not even enter it. Scripture points to the Temple Mount as God's footstool on earth. When I approached the Wall and laid my forehead against those cool, ancient stones, I immediately began to weep. It was hard to cry quietly, yet I could not risk offending the Jewish women who were also weeping and praying. At times it was even difficult to remain standing in this awesome presence of the Lord. Yes, the Western Wall is a very important stone in Israel.



Golgotha

Two other very important stones, for the believer, are Golgotha and the Garden Tomb. Golgotha is at the northern most part of Mt. Moriah, the mountain on which the Temple stood. In the Old Testament this hill was part of Solomon's quarries. God commanded that the sound of the chisel was not to be heard in the Temple during its' construction. Golgotha stands approximately 1/4 mile from the city walls at a busy intersection of the roads to Jericho and Damascus. The Romans crucified their victims along busy roads so the crucifixion would serve as a lesson to all citizens. Jesus was probably not crucified on top of Golgotha but at its' base. Today a bus station occupies the area at Golgotha's base. How appropriate, somehow, that the place where God's Son laid down His life for our sins is still a busy part of Jerusalem. So many of the sacred sites have been covered over by Roman Catholic cathedrals so it is refreshing to see a site that isn't.



Burial spot in the Garden Tomb

The Garden Tomb is within a stone's throw of Golgotha. Archeologists have determined that it is a genuine first century tomb hewn out of rock. There are two burial places in the tomb, but only one of them has been used. We literally were within finger-reach of the place where Jesus' body lay! We were inside the tomb where the angels announced to the surprised women: "He is not here, He is risen!" In fact, that quote is engraved on the door to the tomb. Of course, when Jesus was buried in the tomb a large stone was rolled over the doorway and sealed. The channel for the stone is still there but the stone is gone. How appropriate that the stone that sealed our Lord in His tomb is no longer around! I have been to the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and I can testify that He is not there!



While in Jerusalem, I took a picture of some very important stones, at least in my mind. They are in the excavation park around the southern side of the Temple mount. Archeologists have determined that they are probably from the Temple that was destroyed in 70 A.D. They remind me of Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction when He said, "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Mark 13:2) We know from reading the prophets that Jerusalem will play a prominent role at the end of time so to me, at least, these stones are significant prophetically. Daniel and John the Revelator tell us to watch for the "abomination of desolation" on the Temple Mount. We know that when Messiah comes and sets His foot on the Mount of Olives to the east of the city, a great earthquake will split the mountain in two. Scripture teaches us that one day there will be a New Jerusalem coming down out of Heaven. So these stones are a reminder to us, as believers, to adhere Jesus' warnings in Mark 13. He tells us to "watch out no one deceives you," to "be on your guard," to "keep watch," and finally to "watch." Just as the Jews living in the Holy Land are constantly on the alert for potential terrorism, Jesus commands us to be watchful and on our guard as we see His coming approaching. We saw many soldiers while in Israel and they always had their weapons--in restaurants, in cars, trucks, tanks, in stores, and even in the restroom. They are not allowed to leave their guns at home but must have them on their person at all times. They are always on watch. Are we?



BONES

The people who live in Israel come from many different ethnic and national backgrounds. They have immigrated or made aliyah to Israel during the past 50 years from literally every country in the world. They live under the threat of violence and war and carry a heavy tax burden to support one of the world's strongest armies. Life in Israel is never dull, always challenging, and the future promises to be even more interesting!

Not every Jewish Israeli is an observant Jew. There are many secular Jews in Israel, people who believe in their nation's right to exist but do not necessarily subscribe to belief in the God of Israel. On the other end of the spectrum are the orthodox Jews. These are highly legalistic people who hold to the Mosaic Law explicitly. Its' important to realize that most branches of Judaism place a greater emphasis on man's interpretation of the Scriptures rather than on the Scriptures themselves. Jesus referred to this in Mark 7 when He said, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." (7:8)

When I was praying at the Wailing Wall I was so impressed with the women around me. Many were orthodox and were going through their prayer books while bowing at the wall. Some refused to turn their back on the wall, instead they backed away from it while continuing to bow. Obviously they were showing great respect and reverence for this holy place and were quite devout but their absence of joy in the midst of their religious observance grieved my heart. One woman at the Wall was the self-appointed religious policewoman (maybe a modern day feminine Pharisee). She kept a scowling watch on everyone and would scold one for showing too much flesh, while chastizing another for not behaving appropriately. Other women were tending children while praying. I saw tears, piety, faith, and religious duty but no joy. I was overwhelmed with concern for them and prayed that they soon would see Him whom they had pierced.

While visiting Shepherd's Field just outside of Bethlehem, I was impressed by a young Arab girl, carrying a goat. It is hard for those of us so influenced by the western media to understand that not every Arab in Israel is a Palestinian or even subscribes to Palestinian politics. In fact, I met one Arab businessman who is so disillusioned with the Palestinian Authority that he is considering a move to America! There are many innocent people, including the children, who are caught in the middle of the age-old struggle between the sons of Isaac and the sons of Ishmael. They are desperate for peace.



The soldiers we encountered never ceased to amaze me. Every Israeli citizen, except for the Orthodox Jews are required to serve in the military. These young men and women daily face the possibility of laying down their life for their country. While we were in the Galilee region we saw many tanks and convoys which we assumed were on a military drill. While on top of Megiddo, overlooking the Valley of Megiddo (or Armageddon) military jets taking off, one right after the other, made conversation impossible. We later learned that the Israelis were involved in some military action that particular day. So the tired soldiers we ate lunch with had spent the night fighting an old enemy.

The significance was not lost on me as I stood and looked over the Valley of Megiddo, where according to Scripture the last great battle on planet earth will be fought. The ground in Israel is stained by blood from centuries of fighting over the land and we know that the bloodshed is not done, no matter how many peace treaties are signed.



The Messianic Jewish population in Israel is the promise of things to come. They are the firstfruits of the coming ingathering of the Jewish people to their Messiah. Our guides, Sara and Zvi, were both Messianic Jewish believers. Each day they face scorn, ridicule and sometimes danger because of their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah.

In Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones we can find the stages that God has set in Israel's reconciliation to Him. Ezekiel first sees a valley full of dry, bones and is told by God to "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'" When Ezekiel prophesied, the bones came together, tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them but they were not alive. In a sense this describes the Jewish people just after the holocaust--nothing but skin and bones. We toured the Holocaust Museum while in Israel and saw many pictures of concentration camp survivors--nothing but skin and bones.



The next part of Ezekiel's vision involves life coming into the bodies. God instructed Ezekiel to "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" Ezekiel describes the scene in the valley as a vast army and Israel has found it necessary to sustain a vast army since her birth in 1948. It was really due to the horrors of the holocaust that the state of Israel exists today. I do not believe that today's United Nations would vote to allow the nation to exist, if given the opportunity. So this second phase is the formation of the state of Israel.

The last picture Ezekiel sees in the Valley of Dry Bones is of a people who are alive spiritually. God says, "Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I

open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord." (37:13-14) We are seeing this last picture fulfilled today. More Jewish people have come to belief in Jesus as the Messiah in the last 19 years than in the previous 1900 years. Prophecy is becoming the daily news. My challenge to you is to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, knowing that true peace will only come when Jesus the Messiah reigns in the hearts of His chosen people.

