

A Devotional Tour
of Israel

30 Days

in the Land of the Book

Robert A. Carlson

Foreword and Acknowledgments

A personal highlight in the lives of many Christians is a tour in Israel, the “land of the book.” There is something special about visiting the land and locations where God revealed himself to the world through his relationship with this nation and people. It is inspiring to follow the footsteps of Jesus, to stand in the places where he taught, performed miracles, walked with his disciples, and even where he died for us and rose again. It is hard to describe the joy of visiting so many of these places where God “at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [and] in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1-2). The Bible comes alive in a new way, describing real places, and you read it differently than you did before.

However, a trip to Israel is expensive and requires significant time, stamina and mobility to visit many of these places. Many would like to go, but are not able to make the journey, at least not yet. Still, they would love to see some of these places and reflect on God’s word as it relates to the specific geographic context in which the story of the Bible unfolds. I have created this booklet to bring some of these locations to you and to share some of what I might have said on location if we were to visit these sites together.

It is my sincere hope that you gain some of the benefit of such a trip by spending some devotional time considering the story of the book as you travel day-by-day from one site to another. The locations are laid out chronologically from Abraham to Paul.

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Finally, may the ancient Passover prayer be true: “Next year in Jerusalem!”

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Day 1

Beersheba

Read Genesis 20-21

In a tour of Israel, Beersheba would probably be later on your itinerary, but we'll stop here first, because of its early significance in God's story. When Abraham separated from his nephew Lot, he gave Lot his desire to live near the cities of the fertile Jordan River plain. So Abraham moved south to the area of Beersheba and dug wells here. Compared to many fertile regions in Israel, Beersheba is quite desolate, perched on the edge of the Negev desert. To live here, Abraham would have to trust God to provide. Wells would have been important for anyone to survive and prosper here. In fact, competing herdsman would soon appropriate for themselves the well Abraham dug here, causing Abraham to redeem it with 7 lambs (21:30-32). That is why it is called Beersheba, the well of the seven.

This harsh landscape around Beersheba has witnessed other harsh episodes in Israel's history. It was near here that in fear Abraham lied to the local ruler Abimelech, saying that Sarah was just his sister. Sarah ends up in Abimelech's harem, and she is only kept safe because God warns the man in a dream to keep his hands off her. Abraham sent Hagar and the boy Ishmael away, to fend for themselves in this desolate region. But God met Hagar there, provides for them and promises to also bless Ishmael (21:14-20). From here Abraham and Isaac set out for the sacrifice on the Mountains of Moriah (Gen 22), and believe the promise that "God will provide himself a lamb for the sacrifice."

Here Jacob deceived his father Isaac, disguising himself as Esau to steal the birthright, and was forced to flee into self-exile. Joseph probably passed through Beersheba on his way to Egypt, after his brothers sold him into slavery. When Jacob follows Joseph into Egypt he pauses at Beersheba. God tells Jacob to proceed, promising that God himself will go down to Egypt with them and that he himself will also bring them back out of Egypt (Gen 46).

Beersheba is a desolate place where human deception and injustice have repeatedly occurred, and yet over and over again, human unfaithfulness and treachery are met by God's intervention and restoration. The covenant made at the cost of seven lambs to provide water for life anticipates the New Covenant that God would make through God's Son. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and from him flows rivers of living water.

You might say that we live in Beersheba. Like Abraham we seek to trust God and follow him, and yet deception and injustice abound in dry and thirsty lives. We fail and fall short—but God has redeemed us by the Lamb of God. Like Abraham we fail, and yet like Abraham we continue to have faith, not in ourselves but in God who saves and keeps us. Paul tells us in Romans 4 to continue in Abraham's faith, believing and trusting God. And when you believe God, we don't need to selfishly make a way for ourselves at the expense of others, like in the episodes with Lot, or Abimelech or Hagar, or Jacob, or Joseph's brothers. In the midst of any injustice or unfairness, we can trust God to ultimately rescue and restore us because Jesus is the lamb God provided to do just that.



Day 2

Jericho

Read Joshua 6



When you visit the ruins of Jericho there are several trenches dug into the multiple layers of the city's history. You can see the layers of different walls and structures from the city's many generations and even a stone tower dating to 8000 BC. The excavation layers of Jericho establish it as one of the oldest cities on earth.

We can read about the earliest biblical archeologist exploring Jericho in the early 1900s. These excavations uncovered bricks from the city walls which had fallen down the defensive slope, providing steps for the Israelites to climb up and into the city. They even uncovered one section of that Joshua-era wall which had not collapsed. That section of wall, with houses along the wall, appeared to verify the story of God's mercy to a woman named Rahab who had protected the Israelite spies. They also recovered large storage jars still filled with burnt grain which had been burned in a great fire. The burned grain indicated the city's collapse was just after harvest, and yet the spoils captured, such as the grain, were devoted to God as a burnt offering, rather than taken by the victors, just as described in Joshua 6.

Unfortunately the site has not been well cared for, and much of what was previously uncovered has been lost to the elements. In this photo you can see the stone footings or foundation of the city wall, with a mud brick structure in front and Kathleen Kenyon's excavation trench in the background. However, many find a visit to Jericho somewhat disappointing because you can't see what you most hoped to see: the walls that fell down. The mud bricks that formed the wall on top of these stone footings are long gone. Walking around on the archeological mound of Jericho, one can easily gather pottery remnants dating to before Abraham and see traces of multiple levels of bricks and walls dating from Abraham to Moses. If you look close you can even spot a layer of grey ash from a fiery destruction in the midst of the many centuries evidenced by these layers. But, those tumbled down bricks from the wall are gone...and maybe that's the point. We don't visit Israel to prove the biblical account. But, believing that God did what his word says, you can still stand atop Jericho and be reminded that the walls are still gone, and the city was abandoned, Just as God's word says.

Perhaps one lesson we should take from the long-gone walls of Jericho is to believe God when he says that walls and gates will not prevail against him. 1400 years after Jericho, Jesus told his disciples that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt 16:18). Therefore, like Joshua at Jericho, we will believe God's word and declare God's praises even if we seem to be going in circles. We will advance into territory the enemy seeks to hold, because God's word will always be true and the gates of hell and the walls and strongholds of the enemy cannot prevail against Christ's church proclaiming his gospel.

Go ahead—keep telling God's mercy and singing his praise, and just see what God will do. Maybe the truth that Jericho's wall could not resist God's advance means that God's gospel can also break through the walls people put up today.

Day 3

6

Hazor

Read Joshua 11 and Judges 4

"Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms" (Josh 11:10). Visiting the site of Hazor today, you have to use your imagination, because while the excavations are significant, there are still 175 acres which are not yet uncovered. In Hazor you can view the remnants of Canaanite temples destroyed by Israel (upper left, under the canopy), enter city gates built by Solomon (center), and stand in a watch tower fortress built just before the Assyrian invasion.

Hazor has perplexed Biblical archeologist at times because it contains a large Canaanite temple/palace which shows evidence of being burned in an extremely hot fire, hot enough to crack and fragment it's largest stones (inset). For a structure fire to burn that hot, there must be an unusual amount of fuel, such as the temple being filled with captured oil and grain and other combustibles before it was burned. This would fit the description in Joshua 11 that all the spoils captured in Hazor were devoted to the Lord for destruction. However, the fiery destruction of the Canaanite temple/palace structure which has been excavated, dates to the later time of the Judges, not the time of Joshua. Is the Bible wrong?

When you don't understand something in the Bible, it's wise to trust it to the Lord and wait for more information to come—read further and let more evidence surface. For example, archeologists Yigael Yadin, Amnon Ben-Tor, Bryant Wood and others have uncovered evidence of two fiery destructions of Hazor. Multiple excavations indicate a large destruction of the city early in the 14th century BC, at the time of Joshua. These archeological discoveries support the biblical accounts of two destructions of Hazor under two different King Jabins (a dynastic name).

Hazor had an important location, guarding a main route to the north, so it is no wonder that Solomon and later kings of Israel fortified the city as a fortress on their northern frontier. It was just as important as a northern stronghold when conquered first by Joshua and later by Barak and Deborah. Judges 4 does not give many details about the fiery destruction of the second Canaanite temple/palace by Barak and Deborah, But, the archeological evidence and the fire-cracked stones testify to a fiery end. It appears that Barak and Deborah followed Joshua's example. They did what God had previously said to do: they burned the spoils, idols and temple just as Joshua had done previously.

The miraculous victories God gave over a this regional stronghold, and the apparent contradiction between the date of the visible destruction and the dates in Biblical history have a common point. God can be trusted. We can trust God against powers greater than us, even if the task or the opposition seems to much for us. This is what we see in the victories of Joshua and those with him, and again with Barak and Deborah. Even though Barak was hesitant at first, he could trust God. We can also trust God when we don't yet see how the circumstances in front of us fit with what God has said in his word. When something seems to suggest God's word is wrong, just wait for more information to surface. God's word will be vindicated. You can believe God's word, and you can believe God's truth that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (Phil 4:13).





Day 4

Read Judges 18

Dan

The story of Barak and Deborah reveals some weakness in Israel's leaders, but it is one of the good stories in Judges—especially compared to the story of Dan in Judges 18. That's a story of the Israelites not believing God and therefore not receiving and possessing the inheritance the Lord had given them. The family division (or tribe) of Dan did not drive the Canaanites out, so instead they went looking for a new home, someplace they can take on their own. Disregarding what God has decreed, they decide for themselves what will be right for them. It sounds too much like Genesis 3, and it ends with similarly tragic results.

Instead of dislodging the Canaanites whom God had determined to evict, the clan of Dan went all the way to the northern boundaries of Israel and overtook a peaceable and defenseless people in the town of Laish. Not only was this unjust; it was contrary to the nature of God. God's decree to give them the Canaanites' land was his just judgment on the Canaanites idolatry and immorality. But rather than replacing the Canaanites, the story of Dan confirms the trajectory of the book of judges: the Israelites are becoming like the Canaanites.

Judges 18 begins with an ominous echo of the description in Judges 17:6 that "in those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Our American impulses might applaud their initiative and entrepreneurial ambitions—they make a plan, it's radical, but it just might work. But it's their own plan, contrary to God's word, and contrary to his purposes for them. Instead of trusting God's promise they lean on their own understanding, and they go astray. They choose for themselves what they think will be good, and in doing so they choose evil, and evil Canaanite idolatry becomes their legacy.

Even on the way to their new self-determined inheritance, they stop to steal someone else's idol and faux priest—a Levite who has disregarded the law of Moses. They convince themselves that this priest and his "gods" will bring them blessing in their new location. But, their establishment of a new place to worship foreshadows what Dan is still best known for today. Within a few hundred years, when Jeroboam breaks away from Judah and divides the kingdom, he establishes altars and golden calves for Israel to worship at Bethel and at Dan. Jeroboam blasphemously declared "Behold your Gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1Kings 12:26-30). These idols would be a continuing snare to Israel, leading to their spiritual and then their national destruction.

The site of Jeroboam's altar and temple at the city of Dan (photo) continue to warn us that even while initiative, self-reliance and self-determination are helpful traits, they also have a dark side. These traits have made America successful, but, whenever they are not yielded to God's will and his purposes, they become morally and spiritually destructive. We were given a will in order to freely worship God by carrying out God's will in his creation. If we decide for ourselves, apart from God, what will be good or evil, our self-reliant choices will likely lead to destruction, for us and for others, just as it did in Genesis 3 and in Judges 18. Blessing comes in trusting God's word and yielding your will to God's purposes.



Day 5

Read 1 Samuel 17

Elah Valley

The Elah Valley is a serene and scenic spot in Israel, but it has not always been so peaceful. There was a time when this natural gateway between the Philistine coastal plain and the Judean foothills was the epicenter of spiritual and mortal combat. It was here that the Philistine and Israelite armies met in a stalemate. The Philistines filled the ridgeline to the right and the Israelites under King Saul were on the ridgeline on the left. Either army would have to leave their high ground, cross the valley and then attack uphill to break through. So the stalemate continued, with lots of taunting and trembling going on but no real progress being made.

Then came David, bringing “cheese sandwiches” from his father to his brothers and others on the front lines. David is shocked by what he sees, Israel’s soldiers cowering at the Philistine Goliath’s challenge. David’s unwillingness to accept fear over faith angers his brothers, who have already capitulated in their hearts, if not in body. But this is not a story about other’s cowardice or David’s bravery. This is a story about one’s persons faith in the face of rampant unbelief. In fact, it’s likely that fear has not crowded out the brother’s faith, but that fear crept in because faith was not there. In contrast, David genuinely believes God’s promise that God has given Israel this land, and that if they trust him and walk in his ways, God will give them victory over their enemies. Believing God’s promise and covenant, David has walked in his ways and experienced God’s deliverance, even as a teen boy protecting the family flocks. So he expects God will deliver him here as well.

We should be encouraged by David’s persistence in faith and keep believing God even when no one else around us does. David’s faith is not determined by the culture or the crowd. David believes what God has said is true and so he takes action in line with what God has said. And David acting in faith impacts others.

Look again at David’s declaration of faith in the face of the giant: *“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts...whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give you into our hand.”*

It is not only Goliath who will be impacted by David’s faith. David knew that God would give him victory, and in doing so, others would know that the Lord is God and it is he who saves. By living out his faith, David gives others around him courage to also believe. And there’s more: David believed that his faith in God’s salvation could have an impact far beyond the present crisis and even beyond his present time. David acted in faith so that “the world may know. And look, even today we continue to know, even through David’s story, that the Lord is God and it is he who saves those who believe and trust him.

Keep believing God even if it seems that no one else does. When you take God at his word, you may give others the courage to believe his word also. And, like the story of David, you never know how far the impact of your faith will reach.

Day 6

Engedi

Read 1 Samuel 24 and Psalm 63

The oasis of Engedi is the place in the wilderness where David hid from Saul. The cliffs contain many caves and everyone wants to know which one is the one where David and his men were hiding. It is also the scene of a later crisis in the days of King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20). In each episode, the same lesson is learned: we can entrust ourselves to God's provision and promise.

David and his hundreds are being hunted by Saul with his thousands. Near the springs of Engedi, Saul goes into a cave to relieve himself, since the public restrooms had not yet been built. Saul happens to enter the very cave where David and his men are hiding. Perhaps at first David fears imminent discovery, but then they realize that Saul is vulnerable. The men urge David to take this opportunity to kill his tormentor. But David trusts himself to the Lord who has anointed him to be the next king of Israel. He recognizes that the Lord previously anointed Saul, so Saul is the Lord's responsibility, not David's.

Instead, in an unexpected act of mercy, David appeals to Saul one more time to trust the Lord's purposes instead of seeking to secure his future by his own will and strength. Engedi has been an oasis of streams in the desert, a source of living water for David, which he writes about in Psalm 63. Now David becomes a refreshing stream of God's mercy toward Saul. Engedi not only reminds us that God will protect us and provide for us, it also reminds us that others around us need us to be a refreshing source of God's mercy in the midst of their desert.

How did David know that instead of taking Saul's life in that cave, David could show Saul mercy and even take the chance of exposing his location to the one who sought to destroy him? Psalm 63 reveals that in this dry and thirsty land, David's soul had thirsted for God, He remembered God's power and sovereignty and he knew that God's "right hand upholds me, but those who seek my life shall go down into the depths of the earth." David knew God had his back and his future. David also knew that God was merciful and gracious, and so it was in harmony with the heart of God to extend grace and mercy to the one who tormented him.

I think of Engedi as not only a place of God's mercy and provision; I also see this oasis in the desert as an example. Just as Engedi was a place of refreshing grace and safety for David, so David became a safe source of God's grace to Saul. Maybe God not only promises to provide for you and I in a dry and thirsty land—maybe the Lord would also have us to be a source of his grace and mercy to others, even our enemies, because that is what he has been for us. It might be a kind word, an offer of help, or an encouraging note or gift. In the midst of their hurries and worries of life; you could be an Engedi for someone around you.

Lord, who is around me that I could be a source of your living water? Help me to bring your mercy and forgiveness to others in ways that show them Jesus.



Day 7

The City of David

Read 2 Samuel 11

The City of David is one of the “must see” places in Jerusalem. Here you can walk amongst the ruins of David's' palace and administrative buildings that were used until the Babylonian captivity. You can see the Canaanite water passages which likely gave entrance to Joab's raiders when David conquered the city, and you can walk through King Hezekiah's tunnel which rerouted the water to the pool of Siloam in anticipation of coming Assyrian invasions. You can see the remains of walls which were built before David and sections of the wall hurriedly rebuilt by Nehemiah. Standing in the midst of these locations reminds us that God's story in the Bible concerns real people in real places at particular times and circumstances. In this photo, the sloped stonework supported King David's palace, which was just below and behind the hanging red flowers. The pillars in the center of the photo remain from a house terraced into that slope below the palace (see inset).

Standing at the top of the stairs, you can imagine David, when he should have been off at war, instead gazing across the city below him. Perhaps he thought to himself, “Is this not the great Jerusalem, which I have conquered...” Those are the fateful words Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar would later utter from his own rooftop (Daniel 4:30). Looking down across the rooftop sundecks of the homes below him, David sees the woman Bathsheba bathing—and the rest is tragedy.

Recently I was reminded how easy it is to rest on past accomplishments and begin to coast along, instead of continuing to press on for more victories and advances which God will give. It was “in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle,” but David let others go into the battle and he stayed home. David's downfall in this moment came not only because he looked where he should not have looked, or even that he then looked again, instead of turning away. His downfall began earlier by not engaging in the battle where he should have been. David was idle and temptation found its opportunity.

To often we look for victory in the Christian life merely in not doing what we should not do. That may keep us from certain sin, but victory comes in advancing where God tells us to take new ground, rather than simply gazing across yesterday's victories as if they were enough. Not engaging in the battle is, in itself, defeat.

You and I have been given victories and fruitfulness by God. You have experienced his blessings and his grace in time of need. Don't stop now, don't stay still too long. The culture's currents and our own self-serving sinfulness press against us, and if we do not follow God's call forward and upward, we will instead slip downward, and find ourselves somewhere that we don't belong.

Father, guard us from being led into temptation and deliver us from the evil one, and instead lead us in your victory by following Jesus. Don't let me rest in what you have already done through me, when you are calling me to the next battle or to new fruitfulness. Send me again to others to help bring them into your family.



Day 8

It all began with Gezer

Read 1Kings 9:15-17; 11:1–43

Gezer was a fortress city overlooking the central coastal plain of Egypt. The city protected this fertile and prosperous region, and also protected the main coastal trade route from Egypt to Phoenicia and beyond. Gezer had been a fortress of the Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines before the Egyptian Pharaoh conquered it again and gave it as a dowry to his daughter, whom he gave to King Solomon as a wife. In this political union, she becomes the first of Solomon's many foreign wives.

To give Solomon Gezer was a generous gesture. It strengthened Israel militarily and also enriched his treasury because Gezer could tax trade caravans on the coastal highway. This treaty seemed to give Solomon everything: a beautiful wife, increased wealth, more strength and power, and yet it was actually the beginning of his undoing. It's a paradox that what seemed to make Solomon stronger actually weakened him. Solomon built up Gezer, along with Megiddo to the north and Hazor farther north as strategic fortress cities to guard key routes. In each of these cities you can still be seen the foundations of Solomon's three-chambered gate (photo) which gave these cities a strongly defended entrance.

But Solomon's true strength did not come from strategic alliances and fortress cities, and his true prosperity could not come from taxes and trade. Security and prosperity were his inheritance from the Lord, for both king and nation, as they walked with God in his ways. God forbid the king from taking foreign wives because God knew they would draw his heart away from the Lord to their own gods. This is what happened with Solomon. Solomon not only built the Lord's temple in Jerusalem, he also built many temples and high places for the gods of his wives. These became a spiritual snare to both the king and the nation, and there would be a price to pay.

In the first few years after Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam loses most of his kingdom when the 10 northern tribes of Israel break away. At this time, the current Pharaoh, Shishak, sees his opportunity and invades Judah. Pharaoh takes back Gezer and presses on all the way to Jerusalem. There he robs the treasures from the temple, perhaps recovering all the tax income lost by Egypt from the time Gezer had been given to Solomon. It was a high price to pay, to learn that safety and prosperity could never come from compromises contrary to the word of the Lord. If only Israel could have learned it...

If only we could learn it too. We, like Solomon, are easily enticed by what seems good and promising, but is contrary to the Lord's promise. We don't go too far, it's just one little compromise, and just like Gezer is such a nice city in such a nice location, it seems like a pretty good trade-off. But it will cost more than it seems. As far back as the Garden of Eden, God's limits are always intended to guard our hearts in order to keep us close to him. If we walk contrary to God's word, we are walking away from him. And for Solomon, that all began with Gezer.



Day 9

Read Psalm 20

Megiddo

Megiddo is a gateway fortress city whose strategic location controlled the fertile Jezreel valley. Here the coastal plain stretched east all the way to Galilee, and from there the trade highways continued north to Assyria and northeast to Damascus and Babylon. Megiddo sits in the shadow of Mount Carmel on the south edge of the Jezreel Valley and at the mouth of one of three passes through the steep Carmel ridge. Because of its strategic location, Pharaoh Thutmose III declared that "whoever conquers Megiddo conquers 1000 cities."

Early excavations here revealed a large Canaanite altar (photo). Canaanite idolatry was revived by Israel under kings like Ahab, leading to the spiritual faceoff with the prophet Elijah on Mt Carmel. It was also here that Solomon continued to compromise by trusting in his own provisions instead of trusting God. At Megiddo Solomon stabled his horses and chariots, horses God had said the king of Israel must not trust (Deut. 17:14-17, Ps. 20:7). Ultimately Israelite chariots would prove as tragic in this valley as they had for Sisera in Judges chapter 4. It was here that the last good king of Judah, Josiah, would be killed in a chariot battle after interfering in a conflict between Egypt and Babylon. It was also to the presumed safety of Megiddo that Josiah's predecessor, Ahaziah, would flee in his chariot after being mortally wounded by Jehu.

Perhaps these background details all converge to make Megiddo an appropriate representation of the culmination of humanity's rebellion against God. It is a fortress of human self-reliance and military strength, with storehouses collecting wealth and altars to false idols—all the things we tend to trust in instead of God. In Revelation 16:16 *Har Mageddo* (Armageddon) is described as the place where the nations will gather for their last rebellion against the King of kings when our Lord Jesus comes to rule the earth. Megiddo is a real place, with a real and awful history and a real, and awe-full future. Standing here one is reminded that God's word is true about the past and about the future.

Visiting Megiddo, among the remaining stone mangers (inset), where Solomon's horses were once fed, I am also reminded of the subtle temptation to trust in something else (like horses and chariots or warehouses of wealth) instead of trusting in the true and living God. Sometimes it is hard to know the difference between making prudent preparations for what might happen versus not trusting God. It is good to save for emergencies and the future, and it is good to be able to defend yourself, your family, even your country. But when does prudent preparation become its own idolatry in trusting something else instead of God? The reason it's hard to say is that the problem is not with horses, but in our heart. What am I trusting in? What makes me feel safe, the security system and the Glock? What makes me confident about the future: the direction of the Dow or my balance in the bank? If I'm not able to tell if I'm trusting something too much, I may need to loosen my hold on it, open my hand, and allow God to do with it whatever he will...



Day 10

The Conflict of Carmel

Read 1Kings 18-19

Mt Carmel is part of a ridgeline that runs 30 miles from the southeast end of the Jezreel Valley westward to the Mediterranean Sea. The highpoint of this ridge, near to the west end, is Mt Carmel itself. Because this high ridge forms a barrier to moisture carried inland from the sea, if there is rain anywhere in the vicinity, there will be rain and storms on Mt Carmel, keeping it green and lush even when the valley below is dry. This is why Carmel was known to the Assyrians as "Baal of the headlands." They believed Carmel was the home of Baal.

That is why Elijah's showdown against the prophets of Baal occurs here. The various gods of the ancient near east were considered to be local gods whose power was strongest in their own territory, Elijah gives Baal home field advantage. If Baal cannot show himself here, he should not be feared or followed anywhere. Elijah gives the prophets of Baal a 400 to 1 advantage, he lets them go first, and even dares to mock Baal in what was thought to be Baal's own house!

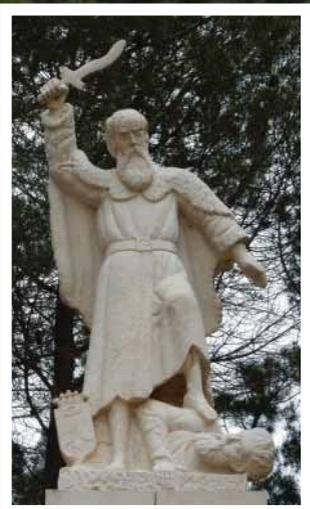
Why is Elijah so bold? He is standing on God's word. This showdown occurs after three years of drought which has left some of the most fertile land in Israel desolate. God had told his people that in this land he would give them, he would provide the rain and make the land fruitful. But, if they served other gods he would not give rain (Dt. 11:10-17). Israel had turned to Baal as the guarantor of their prosperity, and so God withheld his rain—let Baal provide...

The "watershed" moment comes when the people watching on the plateau just below (photo) cried out "Yahweh, he is God!" After this collective rejection of Baal, Elijah can expect rain to return, and so he sends his servant to watch for clouds to form as he prays. The rain is God's merciful confirmation to a fickle and unfaithful people that just as God withheld the rains to show that Baal would not provide for them, so he sends rain again when they proclaim their faith in him.

The problem is that this greatest of miracles does not sway the heart of the rulers of the land, nor stay in the hearts of the people. It is not that they find faith in the Lord unbelievable, it is that they find faith in the Lord unacceptable. They do not want to believe in the Lord and so they believe in something, in anything else.

And so it is today. Miracles will not make someone believe. Jesus said if they won't believe the scriptures, they won't believe even if someone were to come back from the dead—and he did! (Luke 16:31). Following this triumph which did not have a lasting impact on the people, Elijah wanted to quit. He said to God, "just kill me now" (1 Kings 19:4). But the Lord had other ministry for Elijah to do, and besides there were other faithful followers too, 7000 more.

You and I need to know that too. Many people around us will not believe—not because the gospel is unbelievable, but because to them it is unacceptable. So they devote themselves to things that are truly unbelievable instead. Yet we press on, God has called us and still has ministry for us to do, and he is more active in saving others around us than we realize. "This is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:1), and God has put that ministry of his saving gospel in our hands.



Day 11

Joppa

Read Jonah 1 and Acts 10:1-18

Throughout the Old Testament Joppa was Israel's only Mediterranean port. It was here at the port of Joppa that cedars arrived from Lebanon for the interior paneling of Solomon's temple. This was also the main route out for Israel goods and travelers headed west across the Mediterranean. That's why, when Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh, he instead runs the opposite direction to Joppa.

Jonah was from Gath-hepher in Galilee, which is within a couple miles of Nazareth. So, if he was going to Assyria, he would likely have gone north to Hazor, then northeast to Damascus and then east to Nineveh. Instead Jonah goes south and west to Joppa—God's mission field was by land so Jonah goes by sea. He intends to get as far from Nineveh as he can. The story of Jonah is not just about Jonah, it's about Israel. God intended for his people to be a witness for God to the nations, but they went the other way and followed the gods of the nations instead. But God interrupts Jonah's agenda and gives his prophetic ministry new life, literally. Will God similarly revive Israel's witness to the gentile nations?

To answer that question, we return again to Joppa, many centuries later. Jesus' disciple Peter is staying at the home of a leatherworker named Simon. This itself is surprising, because leatherworker's contact with carcasses was considered unclean to Jewish people. While he is there, Peter has a vision concerning eating unclean animals, which goes against everything he knows. But it's not really about what to eat, it's about who he should go to. Peter's unexpected lunch is interrupted by unexpected visitors calling him to come visit a Roman officer in the very Roman city of Caesarea. To a Jew in the 1st century, the Romans are like the Assyrians in Jonah's day. What will Peter do? Will God's messenger again pull a Jonah from Joppa?

This time, in the power of the risen Christ, God's messenger goes from Joppa to the gentile city he is called to, rather than away. Joppa is no longer a port of escape, now it is again a place from which God begins to build his temple. This time it is the temple of Christ's Church (Eph. 2:19-22).

Today, in Jaffa, there is a replica of Jonah's great fish, but now the fish is smiling. Maybe that's because Peter got the point. We need to follow Peter's example, not Jonah. The gospel of forgiveness and restoration and life with God is for all who will believe, even for those whom we would not be inclined to go to. We too have something of Jonah's reluctance or fear in us, as well as the opportunity to follow Peter's faith and faithfulness.

Lord, help me to see who you have for me to share my faith and hope in Jesus with, even if it seems to me that the gospel is not for them.



Day 12

The Lachish Latrine

Read 2 Kings 18–19

Hezekiah was probably the best king in Jerusalem since David. As is often the case, good people surface during difficult and dangerous times. During his reign, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, and it wasn't be long before the Assyrians returned for Judah and Jerusalem. Hezekiah busied himself preparing his nation for this looming threat, both physically and spiritually.

Hezekiah fortified Jerusalem by building a the "Broad Wall" across the north side of the city and digging "Hezekiah's Tunnel" to secure the city water supply. He also strengthened the fortress cities, including Azekah and Lachish, which an invading army would need to conquer before reaching Jerusalem,

Along with these practical measures, Hezekiah instituted many spiritual reforms. He returned to worship of the Lord as God had prescribed in his word. He purged the land of various forms of idolatry. These included the worship of false gods as well as superstitious traditions that had corrupted their worship of the Lord. As is described in 2 Kings 18:4, "He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it."

Excavations at Lachish in 2016 have uncovered evidence of Hezekiah's spiritual reforms. The photo at left shows the southern side of the Lachish city gate, with its three chambers. A remarkable discovery occurred in the third chamber at the bottom of the photo. A separate small room can be seen at the back in which was found a stone altar along with a niche which likely held an idol or image. The altar had been defaced breaking the four horns off of its corners. Surprisingly, a stone toilet was also found in this back room. After the altar was defaced and a toilet brought in, the room was sealed up and no longer used. Archeologists have concluded that Hezekiah had purposely broken this altar and defiled the shrine by symbolically turning it into a latrine before he closed it for good. This gate shrine had been trusted by previous kings to provide security to the city gate, but Hezekiah insisted that they must trust in the Lord alone and worship God according to God's word. Hezekiah's actions here to discredit and defile this idolatrous shrine echo Elijah's mocking Baal on Mt. Carmel, and follow the example of Jehu, who turned Baal's temple into a toilet in 2 Kg 10:27.

What can we learn from Hezekiah's preparations and reforms? His preparations suggest that along with trusting the Lord, we should take prudent practical steps for security and safety against known threats. But, even more important is that we need to trust God and follow his word, just as Hezekiah returned his people to the Law of Moses. Biblical faith is believing what God has said, and not just following the traditions and practices of the people and generation around us. Jerusalem was saved from the Assyrians because Hezekiah led the people in trusting the Lord, even though the Assyrians said Yahweh was just like all the gods they had defeated,

Lord, help me to be a disciple who trusts and follows you from your word. Give me courage to believe you, so that my faith may help others to also believe.

Day 13

Read Ezekiel 47

The Dead Sea revived

The Dead Sea is dead, there is nothing living in it. No fish, no plant life, not even a Loch Ness (or Dead Sea) Monster. This is the end of the line for the Jordan river. The river is fresh and filled with life all the way down until it spills into the Dead Sea and there it stay, there is no way out except by evaporation. This evaporation, which can be 1/2 inch of depth per day in the summer, leads to a very high mineral and salt content in the remaining water. The salt content can be nine times the salinity of ocean waters, in excess of 30% salt. It's fun to float in the Dead Sea, where it is impossible to sink, but if you get the salt water in your eyes, it will be painful.

The inflow from the Jordan without any outflow makes the Dead Sea the barren oddity that it is. One might make a comparison to Christians, if we only soak up truth, but don't give out to others. If we receive God's blessings, but there is no outflow of his blessing from us to others, we will be different, yet barren, just like the Dead Sea. But Ezekiel takes us in a different direction.

Ezekiel describes the Messiah's coming millennial kingdom and his temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel is shown a small trickle of water coming from the temple that grows as it goes, from a trickle to a flow to a stream to a river. This river is also described in Isa. 35:1-7, Zech. 14:8, Joel 3:18 and Psalm 46:4. The growing and increasing river is a healing stream which brings life out of death, and fruit out of barrenness. When Messiah's river of life reaches the Dead Sea, it turns the salt water fresh. These ultra-salty waters in which nothing can live will be filled with fish and teeming with life for the first time since we don't know when.

Some who read Ezekiel's river of life prophecy believe it is meant to be taken figuratively, that God will give new life from barrenness, not that there will an actual stream from a real temple. But, the many various details including directions and distances, fish and fisherman, swamps and marshes, and even towns along the shore, all suggest that Ezekiel is seeing the real future as it will be.

Still, if Ezekiel's river of life is more than just a metaphor, than the basic principle that God does give life out of death and fruit from barrenness is still true—God has done it before and he will do it again in the future. The things that are broken and wrong in creation will be made right. In fact, not only is God's life-giving something he has done before and will do again, it is something that he is doing now, today.

There's another temple: not the one God will build in the future—One God is building today. Ephesians 2 and 1 Corinthians 3 describe the Church as God's temple. Today it is through Christ's Church that God is made known and worshiped in the world. It is about the Church collectively, and believers individually that Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of their heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:39). Think of it this way, by God's Spirit in us, we are a foreshadowing of that millennial temple. God's Spirit dwells in us and flows from us to people around us. You are a source of God's life and blessing in this barren and broken world for others around you!

Lord, make me a blessing and a channel of your grace and mercy through who you give your life to others around me. Make us your streams in this desert.



Day 14

The fields of Bethlehem

Read Luke 2:1-20

John Beck, in *The Holy Land for Christian Travelers* (Baker: 2017), points to fear as an important feature in God's story at Bethlehem. The first words of Adam to God after his sin in the Garden of Eden were words of fear, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid..." (Gen. 3:10). Humanity has continued to be afraid of God's presence. After being delivered from Egypt, the people perceived the presence of God in the thunder, lightning, trumpet and smoke at Mt. Sinai and they "were afraid and trembled, and stood far off" (Ex. 20:18). Similarly, Isaiah trembles at the presence of God on his throne, saying "woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips..." (Isa. 6:5). So it continues through history, humanity "through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Heb. 2:15).

So, when God's angelic messengers suddenly show up in the shepherds field outside of Bethlehem, the shepherds "were filled with great fear." They knew they are human rebels against Heaven's righteousness and now Heaven's messengers have come. But, surprisingly, the first words from the angel are "do not be afraid." But those are just words—boilerplate—we hear that all the time. Often, when someone tells you "don't be afraid" it is because you actually have very good reason to be afraid! So the angel gives a very good reason not to be afraid, "I bring you good news of great joy which is for everyone! For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Standing in the presence of God or his angelic messengers, sinful humans should rightly be afraid, and yet God has given for us a Savior. We need no longer fear God's just and righteous condemnation of our guilt. "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). We have a Savior, Christ the Lord who has removed our guilt and made the way for us into God's presence, all because we believe God that Jesus is our savior. And we don't come timidly, still in fear, wondering if it can really be true that all of our guilt is removed... In fact we are urged to come boldly before God's throne of grace (not judgment) where we will find God's mercy and grace to help in our times of need (Heb 4:16).

The Shepherds' night shift began in fear, but it ended in joyful songs of praise, first sung by the angels choir and then by the shepherds themselves. They had nothing more to fear, God was for them—in fact God had come for them, on their behalf, to die himself in their place to give them his life. "If God is for us, who can be against us...for nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:31-39). And "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear," (1Jn 4:18). God's love for us in Jesus our savior is perfect, it is complete, it doesn't lack anything. Nothing more is needed except for you and I to believe it.

Lord I believe, help me in my unbelief. Help me to drink in, to read and grasp, to hear and believe how deep and full, complete and unending is your love for me. Help me to so believe it that I can give it away to others in Jesus name. In faith in Jesus, help me live out the encouraging call: "do not be afraid."



Day 15

Baptisms in the Jordan

Read 2 Kings 5:1-14 and Matthew 3

Until the last decade or so, visitors to Israel wanting to be baptized in the Jordan River would go to a location at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, where the river is much cleaner and wider. Until the recent removal of landmines leftover from the 1967 war, the traditional site of John the Baptist's ministry just NE of Jericho was a minefield, just as the topic of baptism can be for some. Today, the Jordan is smaller and muddier than visitors would have imagined; due to irrigation and water use it is only at 5-10% of its original flow. But in this humble state, it does remind us of an important link to baptism, found in the Old Testament.

Naaman, a Syrian general, seeks out the prophet Elisha in hope that he could be healed from his leprosy. This man is an enemy of Israel and has no right or claim to God's merciful restoration, yet God's word through Elisha is he will be healed if he will dip in the Jordan River seven times. The proud man is enraged. He expected some elaborate ritual or incantation. The simplicity of God's decree and his disdain for the river to which he is sent get in his way: "are not the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel!" It is only when the man yields his pride and does what God has said, as simplistic and humbling as it is, that he experiences God's cleansing and healing. In some ways, Naaman has joined with Israel in Joshua's generation, laying aside his own understanding to believe that God would work his miracle in the Jordan and give him new life as he had given Israel,

With this background, John comes baptizing, on the eastern side of the river in Bethany beyond the Jordan. John's baptism is scandalously prophetic: the Jewish leaders were shocked that John would imply that they were as unclean before God as the Syrian leper. And yet, just like Naaman, many came to be baptized in the Jordan, confessing by their coming that they needed God's cleansing and healing in order to enter the inheritance of the Kingdom which God had for his people.

And then there is a third move in the story, one that seemed scandalous even to John: Jesus himself came to be baptized. Jesus did not need to repent or be made clean, he is without sin. Jesus came to be baptized to identify himself with his people who need his cleansing. Jesus does this to "fulfill all righteousness." He joins us in our sin and guilt so that we can be joined to him in his righteousness.

This is what we are declaring when we are baptized. We declare that we have been joined to Christ in his death, so that we are also now raised with Christ to walk in his new life (Rom. 6:4). As surely as Israel with Joshua was given a new life in a new land, and Naaman was given new life in new skin, we also have been given new life in Jesus. Baptism is your confession that you, like Naaman, were unclean and had no claim on God. But because you believe God's word that Jesus identified himself with your sin, God also joins you to Jesus' righteousness and new life—you are fully and wholly accepted by God in Jesus the Son!

Is this your testimony? If so, have you been baptized as a believer in Jesus? If not, why not? If you have, give thanks again that your sin is buried, that you have new life in Jesus, and that you are fully accepted with God in Jesus.



Day 16 the Judean Wilderness

Read Luke 4:1-13 and Psalm 63

After being baptized by John, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. When I think of wilderness, I think of mountains and forests, lakes and waterfalls. But here, the wilderness is a desert, a lonely and desolate place, empty and barren. Here Jesus is tempted by the Devil for 40 days.

It is similar to the wilderness desert that Israel journeyed in for 40 years after coming out of Egypt. Concerning that wilderness experience, the Lord said it was to bring them to the end of themselves, to test what was in their hearts, whether they would keep the Lord's commandments and trust him to provide, knowing "that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:2-3). During their time in the desert, Israel begged to return to slavery in Egypt rather than trust God to give them an inheritance. They made an idol of another god to worship, and they grumbled against God's provisions that sustained them.

Israel faced similar tests again as they advanced into the Judean hills after crossing the Jordan. Achan took things for himself against the Lord's word, they attempted to take Ai in their own strength, and trusting themselves they were deceived by the stale bread of the Gibeonites (Josh. 7, 9). The track record of God's people in the wilderness is not good.

But Jesus is good where we are not. He resisted the devil's temptations in the wilderness. He was tempted concerning bread and his physical needs. He was tempted to yield to Satan as an alternative god instead of trusting his Father. He was tempted to take his identity and mission into his own hands. Jesus was faithful in the same kind of barren desolate place where God's people had failed.

It's easy to read Israel's history and think, "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?!" But it doesn't have to be long without hearing God's voice before we are following other lies. It is not very many barren and seemingly fruitless days before we wonder if God actually does have good plans for us. It is not too many days or weeks of slogging along without seeming to get anywhere before we start thinking of shifting into our own plans.

And yet, the wilderness can be the place where we, like Elijah, hear God's voice. It was in the Judean wilderness where John's message that Israel was without God's life and needed to return to him could be heard. It was in that desert that David realized he needed to stop making his own way and instead once again trust himself to God (2 Sam. 16:5-14). It was during those dry and barren years in the wilderness that David learned to trust himself to God as described in Psalm 63.

Maybe right now you feel like you're in the wilderness: your quiet times seem dry, your prayers bounce back off the ceiling and get jumbled in your head. God seems far away and fruitfulness is far from sight. But the wilderness can have a unique beauty. This is just the place where you—by God's Spirit within—you can choose to trust what you know God has said, even though nothing around you looks like it yet. Remember, faith is the evidence of things not seen (yet).



Day 17

Read Luke 4:14-30

Nazareth Mount Precipice

Nazareth sits in a bowl, surrounded by higher ridges. Because of its isolated rural location, it was only a small village in the days of Jesus. Archeologists believe that the village of Nazareth was not much larger than the entire footprint of the Church of the Annunciation property today. Nazareth would have been a quiet place to grow up—protected, set apart, but right at the edge of major events.

If you climb from Nazareth up to the crest of the ridge, you have a beautiful view of the Jezreel valley. It is easy to imagine Joseph and Mary bringing Jesus up to this viewpoint and rehearsing the biblical events that occurred here. It is likely that as boys, Jesus and his friends would come up here—it may have been one of his first teaching sites as he explained these same events to them. Across the valley to the east is the Harod Spring, where Gideon's army was downsized from 32,000 to 300 so that they would fully rely on the Lord for their victory. On the plains below Mt Tabor, Barak routed Sisera's chariots which became mired in the mud of God's flash flood. Across the valley to the left is where Saul consulted the witch of Endor and further beyond is Mt Gilboa where Saul and Jonathan were killed by the Philistines. Across and to the far right is Mt Carmel where Elijah faced down the idolatry of Baal. In between those two is Megiddo, the site of one of Joshua's victories, the fortress city of Solomon and Ahab, and near there is the site of Josiah's defeat. On a clear day you can see all the way to Gilead, across the Jordan to the east, and as far as the Mediterranean Sea to the west.

This place on the Nazareth Ridge is called Mount Precipice because of the events that followed Jesus' teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus had dared to suggest that God's mercy was given to those whom they considered unworthy outsiders, while it was not extended to Israelites whom they assumed were always worthy of God's blessing. They wanted Jesus to do healings and miracles for their benefit. They are enraged when he declines to be their blessing vending machine and instead dares to challenge their sense of entitlement to God's good. People then and now want God to do what they want, on their terms.

There are some similarities between Jesus in Nazareth and we in our hometown. Jesus is empowered by the Spirit of God to speak the gospel, and so are we (Acts 1:8). Jesus speaks God's truth with authority, but he does so with gracious words and a burden for his listeners. Similarly, we are to "speak the truth in love," and to "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Eph. 4:15; Col. 4:6). As prophets in our hometown, we are viewed in human terms, not as someone God has sent. Finally, Jesus was not afraid of those who opposed him. He knew that though they sought to throw him off this cliff, he was in his Father's sovereign care. We need to know that too. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

They took Jesus to the edge of the precipice, not realizing that they themselves were in danger there, standing on the edge of eternity based on what they would do with Jesus. The people around us stand in a similar place...



Day 18 Capernaum

Read Acts Matthew 8:5-17 and Mark 2:13-17

Capernaum is a special place to visit because Jesus spent considerable time here. This was his home base during his ministry in Galilee. Visitors to Capernaum are impressed by the number of 1st century homes made from the black basalt rock common to the region. In fact, it is likely that Peter's home in Capernaum has been identified and was used for church gatherings as early as the middle of the 1st century. This house then went through several expansions in the following centuries and continued to be a place of worship. The other building in Capernaum that can't be missed is the synagogue. The white limestone stands out from all the other basalt construction. This 4th or 5th century synagogue is built on the foundation of the first century synagogue, destroyed by the Romans, in which Jesus would have preached. Archeologists suggest that Byzantine Christians built this limestone synagogue to commemorate the one where Jesus preached.

I like to think of Capernaum as an unlikely place with unlikely heroes who all fit perfectly into God's kingdom purposes. Capernaum was a fishing village which became more significant in the Roman era due to trade on the international highway and the taxes collected. The trade passing through made it a more cosmopolitan and worldly place, not a religious town that would introduce God's Christ to the world.

Similarly unlikely are some of the key people in Jesus ministry here. Peter does not seem to be a religious man, he sees himself as unworthy of being a disciple. Peter in guilt and shame says to Jesus "depart from me," but Jesus says to Peter "follow me and I will make you fishers of men (Luke 5:8). The same call is extended to Levi, whose occupation was viewed as the worst possible, siphoning taxes from your own people to feed the Roman oppression. Then there is the Centurion, who seems to be by the Jews commendation, a better citizen of the synagogue than they. Still it is surprising that the greatest faith would be found in this Roman officer, rather than in those who were steeped in the word of God. And yet, it is in this unlikely place of Capernaum, rather than Nazareth, Bethlehem or Jerusalem that Jesus focuses the beginning of his ministry. And it is through a fisherman's lack of fish, a tax collector's unpopular party and a Roman's unbelievable prayer that Jesus begins to make himself known.

You may not live in the center of world affairs, your neighborhood may not often make the news. But you may be in just the kind of place in which Jesus chooses to reveal himself. And he chooses to do it through you. He may do it by redirecting your efforts to the other side of the boat, that is, in a slightly different direction. He may use you to introduce him to all the other tax collectors and sinners you know. He may work through you by answering your bold and believing prayers.

It's pretty amazing that we can go and see Peter's house, and see how Jesus was and continues to be worshipped there. It's also pretty special that someone can come to your house or your workplace and see that Jesus is worshipped there. In fact, in Jesus' working, what happens at your house today, may be more important that what happens at Peter's house in Capernaum today...



Day 19

Mount of Beatitudes

Read Matthew 5–7

The traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount is not actually a mountain. It's more of a slope rising up from the Sea of Galilee. There is no archeological evidence to place the Beatitudes at this location, except that this is where Christians from the 4th century onward remembered the event. It's a quiet place with a beautiful view that is a good place to reflect on how things are now, compared to how God's kingdom will be.

Blessed are the poor... blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek...blessed are the righteous...blessed are the merciful...blessed are the pure in heart...blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are those who are persecuted...blessed are you when others revile you... Jesus overturns all our normal assumptions. The gospel that turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6) first turned the disciples thinking upside down—or was it right side up—right here. How can it be that poverty, grief, loss and pain are blessed? "Your reward is great in heaven" and "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 10:39).

Here Jesus declared that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it, more fully than any rabbi had imagined. We are called to new levels of peace, purity, faithfulness, truth and mercy. We pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" because it will be. Our treasure is there, not here, and our Father will keep us for that day, no matter what we go through in these days. The Lord calls us to live already in the kingdom that has not yet come.

Whether it was on this hillside or at another location, Jesus would often withdraw to a quieter place to pray. On this occasion he saw the crowds and he took them with him. They withdraw together away from the busyness and distractions of the towns and cities to focus on God's perspective on life and eternity. Maybe we should think of the "Sermon on the Mount" not so much as a large, public sermon. Maybe we should think of it as a time when Jesus invited those following him, to come with him on one of those quiet withdrawals for prayer he regularly takes. It becomes a time of spiritual retreat where Jesus helps them to reflect on how things really are, compared to how they seem in the moment.

Find a quiet place or room away from hurry and distraction to reflect and pray as you read over these three chapters in the Gospel of Matthew. Take comfort in the reminder that present wrongs will be made right, faith will become sight, and faithfulness will be vindicated. Receive the Lord's correction where it comes as these words slip past external actions and discern the hidden thoughts and intents of your heart. Humbly ask the Lord to work his kingdom will more in your life, in ways that will overflow to people around you.

Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive our debts as we ourselves have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matt. 6:9-13, NET)



Day 20

Caesarea-Philippi

Read Matthew 16:1–17:13

Imagine a massive stone cliff face, 130 feet tall and 230 feet wide, with a large cave from which a deep spring supplies 5200 gallons per second that flows from the mouth of the cave. The unique phenomena of endless water gushing from a seemingly bottomless spring out of this massive rock face, had long suggested that this was a supernatural place. In fact the mouth of this cave was believed to be the entrance to the underworld, the gateway to Hades.

Herod the Great recognized the supernatural aura of the place and built a temple here honoring his patron, Caesar Augustus. The cave, the gate to Hades, was the inner chamber of the temple built in front of it, so that the stream flowed south out of the front of the temple, into the Jordan, and then on to the Dead Sea. It seems that Herod was constructing his own twisted version of the temple of God's kingdom described in Ezekiel 47. However, this was a temple of Hades, not Heaven, a way to death rather than life. At this site there were also temples to Pan, Zeus, Nemesis and even the temple of the sacred dancing goats! It was an unholy, ungodly Disneyland of pagan futility.

It was here that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" and it was in the face of that amazing temple water feature and all these idols that Peter declared, "You are the Christ the Son of the Living God." In contrast to this massive rock face with its pagan temples, it is on "this rock" of the immovable reality that Jesus is the Christ, upon which Jesus would build his church. It is fitting to declare that the gates of hell would not stand against it in the very place that people believed the gates of hell stood. It would not be long before Jesus was crucified, would himself descend into actual Hades, and from their take those OT believers in the Lord with him in his resurrection, as the scripture says "when he ascended on high, he took [free] a host of captives" (Eph. 4:8-9).

So what happened to the gates of hell at Caesarea-Philippi? An earthquake in 749 AD destroyed the by then abandoned temples and caused the top of the cave to fall, blocking the spring from the cave and opening a new outlet for the spring 20 feet below the mouth of the cave. Jesus is risen, the gates of Hell have collapsed—and don't even get me started on the dancing goats!

When you visit the ruins of cities in Israel one of the things you realize is that the city gates were a strategic defensive position. They were the strongest part of the city wall. If the gates were breached the city was lost. When Jesus said the gates of Hell will not prevail against his Church, he is not talking about the Church being attacked by Hell. He is saying the church will advance into Hell's domain. By the gospel of Jesus we free those once held captive by Satan and release them into the kingdom of God's Son. The gospel of faith in Jesus is the power of God unto salvation, even against the greatest strongholds of spiritual lies and unbelief.

Think of it this way, your leading others to faith in Christ and eternal life with God is how Jesus continues to lead captives free from Hell's domain! Jesus continues to overcome the gates of Hell though his Church, that is, through you.



Day 21

Beth Shan

Read 1 Samuel 31 and Luke 12 a Decapolis city

Beth-Shean has a strategic location at the juncture of the north-south Jordan river valley and the eastern tip of the Jezreel valley which runs westward to the Mediterranean. The Egyptians, Canaanites and Philistines built successive fortress cities on the top of the hill from which this photo was taken. This was one of the cities that the clan of Manasseh failed to take from the Canaanites (Josh 17:16; Judges 1:27), and later it was here that the Philistines hung the body of King Saul on the wall to declare their complete victory over Israel (1 Sam 31).

The hindrance which Beth-Shean had been to Israel's living in its inheritance foreshadows its role in the days of Christ and the early church. Beth-Shean became Scythopolis, one of the Roman Decapolis cities. These "ten cities" were Roman showcase cities built to display the glories of the Roman way of life to the "backwards" Galilean and Transjordan peoples. They were intended to instill the same awe and wonder that a visitor from a rural small town might have in their first visit to Manhattan. In the photo you can see remnants of massive government buildings, awe-inspiring temples, colonnaded streets and a beautiful theater where polished performances advanced a cultural message and agenda just as Hollywood and media do today. The public baths and other facilities promised luxury and ease. The Decapolis cities were like glossy brochures boldly declaring, "Come over to the Roman side, we have plumbing!" They were intended to convince the people in the surrounding region that Roman society, religion and morals were superior to their traditional beliefs and values.

Jesus spent a considerable amount of time ministering in parts of Galilee and the Transjordan which were under the influence of Decapolis cities like Scythopolis (see Luke chapters 10-19). The glories of these pagan cities implied that Israel's faith in the Lord was irrelevant in the Roman modern world. However, the early church advanced and grew as the reality of the gospel of life in Christ overwhelmed the empty myth of fulfillment in Roman decadence. The church grew and Rome declined until Scythopolis became a Christian city, because the gospel of Jesus met the real needs in people's hearts which Rome could not. It was only when Rome became Christian and Christianity took on the trappings and earthly glory of Rome that the church began to weaken. In 749 AD a massive earthquake toppled the temporary glory of Scythopolis, but Christ's church, person by person, continues to grow.

The challenge of Israel to receive their inheritance in the midst of Canaanite opposition, and the challenge of faith in Jesus to flourish in shadow of Rome's dominance continues today. Jesus' church continues to show and tell the gospel in a culture that cleverly markets its own answers to the longings of our hearts. But the gods of the Philistines or Rome were not real and did not deliver; only Jesus can satisfy. As the Travis Ryan song says: *In all of my life I'm searching, for what can be only found in you, only you can satisfy. I've seen what the world can offer, in all that can sway me I have found, only you [Jesus] can satisfy.* We may live and work in Beth-Shean, but our life and our future are in Christ.



Day 22

Mount of Olives

Read Luke 19:28-47 and Psalm 24

The most prominent and well-known mountain looking over Jerusalem is the Mount of Olives, directly to the east, across the Kidron Valley from the Old City. This is the same view that Jesus and the disciples would have seen as they came from Bethany and Bethphage, over the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. Descending the hill toward the city, Jesus grieves over the city because of the trouble that is coming upon them after their rejection of Him. "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!...your enemies...will tear you down to the ground... because you did not know (believe) the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:42-44).

From here on the Mount of Olives, seeing the Dome of the Rock where the Temple of God once stood, one is overwhelmed by the spiritual need of this city. This people and nation do not know God, even though God choose to reveal himself to the world through Israel, both in his covenant with them and through his Son Jesus. But their great need is not our only motivation. This picture also reminds us of the great hope and confidence we have in Jesus that strengthens us in serving Him.

If you follow the city wall to the right from the Dome of the Rock you will see the Eastern Gate. It has been bricked closed because of a belief among Arabs that a great Jewish deliverer would enter Jerusalem through the Eastern Gate. To prevent this they blocked the gate and then placed a Muslim cemetery around it. However, this will not stop the Messiah from entering this gate when he comes.

When Jesus came from the Mount of Olives with his disciples, he crossed the Kidron Valley and entered the Eastern Gate and came to the Temple. However, there he found profiteering instead of prayer and the same insincere worship which had caused the glory of God to depart in Ezekiel 9-11. Jesus declares to them "Your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt. 23:38). Jesus is God's glory in person returning to his temple, but finding them not ready for his return. Then Jesus departs, retracing his steps from the temple to the mount of Olives, the same path the glory of God departed in Ezekiel 9-11.

But it doesn't end there. Zechariah 14:4 agrees with Acts 1:11 that when the Lord returns he will first descend to the Mount of Olives. Then he will retrace those same historic steps to come to his temple, through those now closed gates! Psalm 24:7-10 describes those gates' grand opening: "Lift up your heads O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in...Who is this King of glory? The Lord of Hosts, he is the king of glory." This promised coming of our glorious King is the hope that strengthens us for serving him in whatever the ministry he has given us. Jesus is coming, he will reign and we will reign with him.

This is the big story of the Bible: that Jesus would come in humility to save us and that he will come again in glory so that we can live with him in his kingdom. And now this is our story to tell to a world of people in spiritual need. We ourselves have said, "Blessed is Jesus who came in the name of the Lord," we have believed in him. Now we pray that others also will see him through us!



Day 23

Jerusalem

Read Psalm 122 and Isaiah 52

Jerusalem plays a unique role in God's redemptive plan. As early as Genesis 14:18, Abraham meets Melchizedek, the king of Salem, in the Kidron valley (between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives). Abraham is blessed by this priestly king, whose name means king of righteousness and whose title is the king of peace. He gives to Abraham bread and wine and blesses him. There is much about Jesus in this priestly king, as later described in Psalm 110 and Hebrews chapter 7.

But this is not Abraham's only encounter with Jerusalem. Later, in Genesis 22 he will return here, to the mountains of Moriah, to offer his son Isaac. Of course, God does not have Abraham give his Son as an offering, that is for God alone, "God will provide himself a lamb for the sacrifice" (Gen. 22:8). The reference is to Jesus, "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Jerusalem was the capitol city of David's dynasty, anticipating the Son of David, the Messiah, and his kingdom. It is here that God chose to dwell in the midst of his people in the temple, and Jerusalem and the temple was central to God's restoration of Israel from Babylon. It is here that the presence of God in the person of Jesus showed himself as Messiah. It was here that the Prince of glory died for us and was raised from the dead, and it was here that the Church was born (Acts 2). Finally, It will be here that Jesus will return as King of kings and Lord of lords, and will rule the world from David's throne in Jerusalem (Zech. 14). Yes, Jerusalem is center-stage in God's redemptive plan! Perhaps that is why we are drawn to come and stand within these walls, just as the psalmist says in Psalm 122.

Even today we see this comparatively small city, the Old City of Jerusalem, as the continuing center of world affairs. The world would rather move on to other issues and other locations they prefer, like New York, London or Paris. But Jerusalem will not be ignored, God continues to make it center-stage and the focus of Jews, Christians and Muslims around the world. The photo at left shows the Muslim quarter of the Old City, the Dome of Rock where God's temple should be, and the side of the Mount of Olives covered by the tombs of those who hope to be the first to be raised when Messiah does come to reign. But Messiah does not yet reign, and there is conflict instead of peace. How can we know that this will ever change? How can we know that Jesus will actually rule his Kingdom on earth from here?

We know that God will do what he has said, because God has already done just as he has said. God's solution for peace and righteousness was not symbolic or allegorical, it was real and literal. Just as the Servant of the Lord fulfilled all of Isaiah 53, so shall he fulfill Isaiah 52 and Zechariah 14 and everything else written about him in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24:44).

This is our hope and our confidence. This is why we can with confidence be those witnesses with beautiful feet that Isaiah 52 describes, who bring good news of joy and salvation. Today is our day to lift up our voices (Isa. 52:7-10)! No matter what difficulties or situations you encounter today, you are not alone, "your God reigns" and "the Lord will go before you and the God of Israel will be your rear guard"



Day 24

Pool of Siloam

Read John 9

Visitors to the ancient City of David have the opportunity for an unforgettable adventure. They can wade through the 2800 year old Hezekiah's Tunnel from the Gihon Spring to its outlet at the pool of Siloam. There the spring's water was stored within the city walls to outlast the coming Assyrian siege. The water still flows through the tunnel, which shows how long public works projects and municipal water systems ought to last!

By the first century, the pool had been re-purposed into a 225 foot long public mikvah or cleansing pool. Pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship at the temple first came to the Pool of Siloam to ceremonially wash. The terraced steps enabled pilgrims to immerse themselves at whatever water levels the pool might be at.

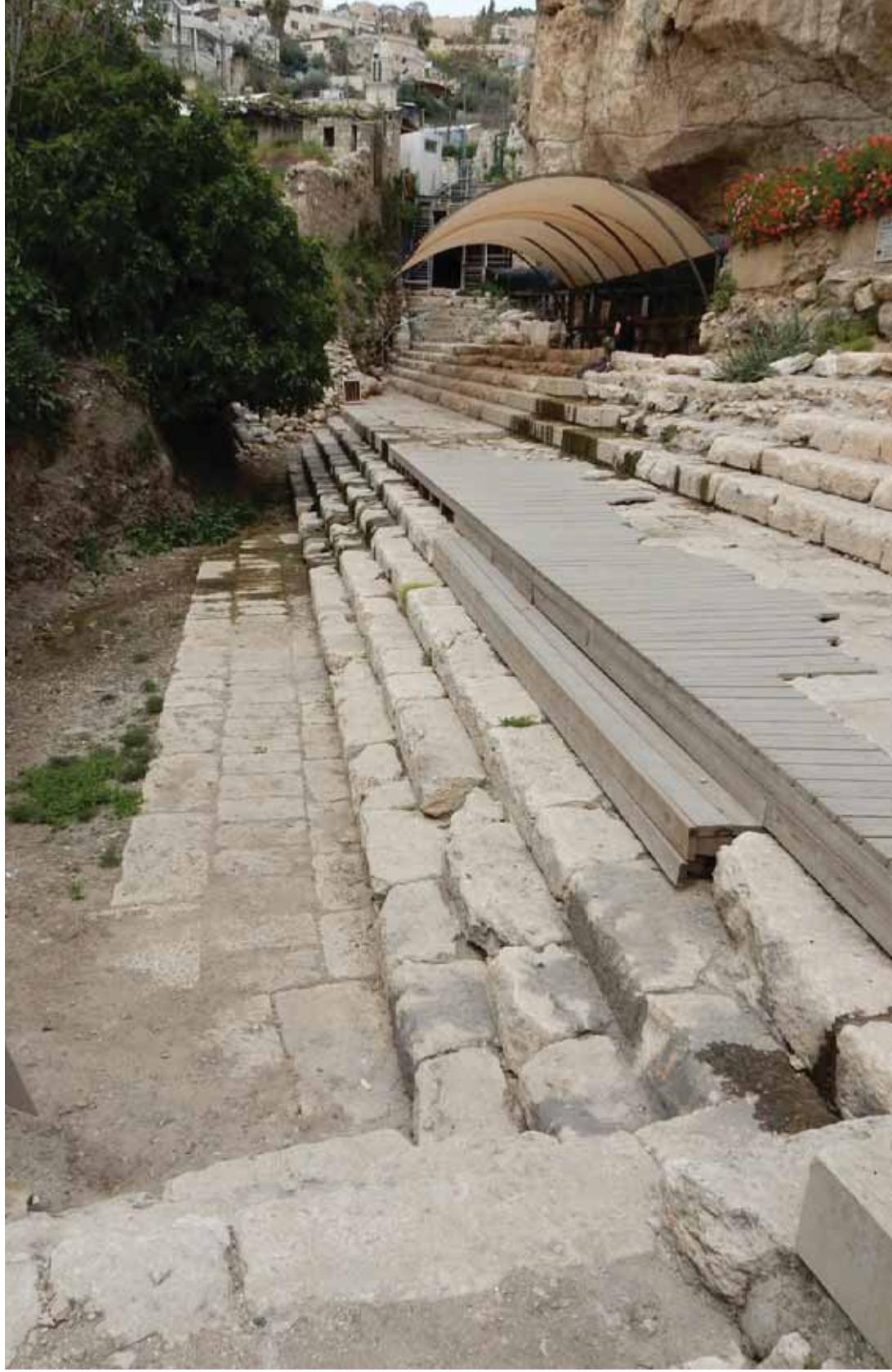
The healing of the blind man in John 9 appears to occur immediately following the Feast of Tabernacles while Jesus and his disciples were still in Jerusalem. During that feast, there was a procession with water from the Pool of Siloam brought up to the temple where it was poured out. On the last day of the feast, there was no water brought up or poured out. That was the day when Jesus called out, "If any man thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (Jn 7:37).

Soon after that, they encounter the blind man. The disciples are more focused on who is at fault, the man or his family lineage. It's a personal version of the ancient paradox, is a man lost because of his own sin or because he is born from sinful humanity. The answer is "Yes." But their interest in theological nuance does not help the man, Jesus does. Without any plea or confession from the man, Jesus mixes his spittle with dust and makes a mud that he applies to his eyes. Jesus sends him to wash in the Pool of Siloam (which means sent). Jesus, the Son sent by the Father, like the spittle sent into the dust, sends the man to the pool called sent. The man does what Jesus says, and coming out of the pool he can see!

There is so much to love in this encounter. Jesus redirects the disciples from looking for whom to blame to looking for how the Lord will be glorified. He reminds them of the urgency of the hour and he shows undeserved and unrequested mercy. Jesus doesn't do what the man expects but instead does what he needs. As a result, the man believes what God has done for him even before he fully understands it. There are so many ways we can follow Jesus in this episode.

What if we were that kind of refreshing source of Jesus' living water? What if we saw in the people around us needs to meet instead of faults to fix? What if we moved to meet a need even before they asked us for help. What if our curiosity about people and their situation caused us to listen to their story instead of assume things about them? What if we sought out someone who has experienced rejection and were able to show them God's acceptance in Jesus name.

We will be more like this, to the extent that we also come and drink in Jesus' grace, forgiveness and healing for us. When Jesus has met our need, quenched our thirst, then from our hearts will flow rivers of living water for others.



Day 25

Temple stones

Read Matthew 24

One of the most fascinating places to visit in Jerusalem are the ruins from the 1st century AD around the Temple Mount. You can sit on the southern steps where people entered and exited the temple area, and on the western side you can visit a street with shops where Jesus and his disciples would have walked (right edge of the photo). Here you can also see the literal fulfillment of some of Jesus words.

When the Disciples were overwhelmed by the grandeur of the temple, as Herod had expanded it, Jesus tempered their enthusiasm in Herod's handiwork with a dose of reality. The temple was for worship, and if Israel did not worship God, the temple would not remain. In fact, Jesus said, "not one stone will be left upon another. All will be torn down."

Sure enough, within 40 years of Jesus' words, the Roman siege of Jerusalem ended with the destruction of the city and the temple in the year 70 AD. Blocks from the temple and porticos which surrounded it were pushed over the edge of the retaining wall where those stones which were not reused in later construction still rest in a jumbled heap for all to see that Jesus' words were true.

In Matthew 24 Jesus looked ahead from that near prediction to events further away. He describes troubles, wars and persecutions culminating in one unmistakable sign that Jesus' coming is near. That sign is the "abomination of desolation" (Dan. 9:27) when the antichrist defiles a future restored temple by setting an image of himself there and claiming himself to be God (see also 2 Thess. 2:4). This will bring further disasters and tribulation and false reports of the Messiah. But this blasphemous imposter will be answered; the coming of the true Messiah won't be missed or mistaken. When the sun and moon have both been darkened, the glory of Christ's returning will be visible to all the earth.

In this prophetic warning, Jesus prepares the Disciples for the trouble and suffering that will come. Those times and events might even cause those who are looking for his coming to lose hope or to be deceived, except now he has told them in advance. Even as we can see that some of what Jesus said has been literally and completely fulfilled, so we can know that Jesus will come again, just as he said.

Jesus words to his disciples remind us to not be carried away by the monuments man builds because, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). The disciples were in awe of a temple Herod had rebuilt in unbelief, in which the priests continued rituals without any faith in God's promised redeemer or resurrection. That temple, as magnificent as it looked, was a spiritual façade. Contrary to those impressive stones, Jesus called the disciples, and we who follow them, to build a new kind of temple, "Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:20-21). This what your work and witness are doing.

Don't look for God's glory in buildings and monuments, look for God's most glorious work in the beauty he builds into the lives of those who trust in him. Join in God's building in the lives of others, for a temple which will last forever.



Day 26

Gethsemane

Read Matthew 26:36-56



Gethsemane is known as the place where Jesus took his disciples and prayed before his arrest. There is a small grove of ancient gnarled olive trees whose olives are still crushed to make anointing oil. John tells us that Jesus and the twelve came here often. We may imagine the disciples camped out under these trees when they come to Jerusalem, but the cool temperatures of spring nights in Jerusalem do not lend themselves to sleeping outside. They would need some kind of shelter.

We know the place as “the Garden of Gethsemane,” but actually Gethsemane was a place within or near the garden. Gethsemane comes from the Hebrew or Aramaic word for “oil press.” Just north of the current site of the olive trees and the Church of All Nations, is a cave called “the Grotto of Gethsemane.” Within this large cave (lower photo) there are indentations in the wall the right size and height for the top pivot beams for two large olive presses. It appears that this cave provided a natural shelter for the presses, near the olive orchard. It may have also provided shelter for visitors on a cool night. This cave appears to be Gethsemane, “the place of the olive press,” within the garden or orchard of olive trees. The eight disciples may have been asleep here when Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to watch and pray just before his arrest. But why did they leave the upper room and come here?

After sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, and giving them some final instruction, Jesus leads them away from the city. Soon Judas will return, leading an armed guard to arrest Jesus. The Lord intends to be arrested, condemned and crucified, so why do they leave? There are several reasons. The vineyard imagery in John 15 suggests that this additional teaching might have happened while they walked down from the city and through the Kidron valley. Changing locations gave more time to prepare his followers for his departure (John 14-16). Moving also gave Jesus time to pray for them and for us (John 17). Finally, leaving the upper room of a house in the city, and going to the olive orchards at the foot of the Mount of Olives made a way for the disciples to escape. In the upper room the disciples would be trapped when the guards came, but in a large dark orchard, while Jesus drew attention to himself, they had a chance to escape (Mk. 14:50). Jesus creates extra time to prepare them, pray for them, and make a way for their freedom.

Sitting here in this olive press cave, it seems wonderfully fitting that the anointed one of God would gather his disciples next to these large presses where olives were crushed so that the oil flowed freely from them. Jesus himself was “crushed for our iniquities” for it was “the will of the Lord to crush him” as an “offering for our guilt” (Isaiah 53:5, 10). And it is by his death for us that the anointing of the Holy Spirit is freely poured out on us. In fact, it was just before coming here to this place, that Jesus told his disciples that it was good that that he goes away (by his death) so that he can send the Holy Spirit to them.

Because God has sent his Holy Spirit, we continue the works which Jesus did, even that final night. We will teach one another the things Jesus taught his disciples, pray for one another, and make it possible for others to have God’s way of escape or rescue through faith in Jesus.

Day 27

Read Ephesians 3:1-20

Church of the Holy Sepulcher

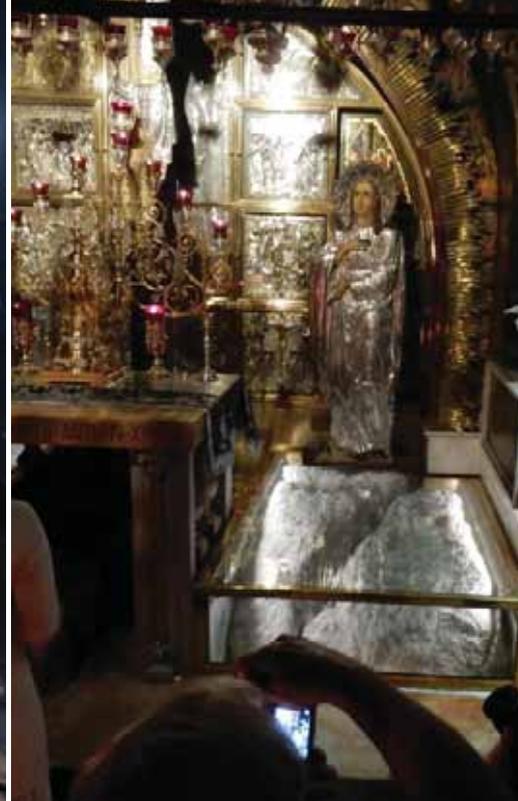
This is considered the most sacred or holy place in the world for Christians. While the Garden Tomb location gives a better feel for what the site might of looked like in the first century, there is much evidence from history, archeology and tradition which confirms this location as the most probable site for the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Both of these sacred sites are contained within the Church, about 100 feet apart from each other.

Entering the church, you take the stairs to the right to stand before the cracked limestone cap of Calvary, a small hill which was then just outside the city walls (upper right). If instead you entered and turned to the left you would come to the "Edicule" or "little house" (upper left) which stands over the site of the tomb, which was originally cut into the hillside. The hill was later cut away to make room for a Roman temple in the 2nd century. The Romans often built their temples on sites that the local people already considered to be spiritually significant. Ironically, seeking to supplant a Christian holy site, they inadvertently helped preserve its location! In the destructions and rebuilding over the centuries, the walls and roof of the tomb were destroyed, so the Edicule recreates and memorializes the space.

The ornate decorations and liturgical formality of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was disappointing for me the first time I visited here, and yet I find myself drawn to this place. It's not for the place itself, but what it represents: the death of Jesus the son of God, his burial in another man's tomb (since he died for others), and his glorious resurrection for our justification. That cracked limestone hilltop could be the place where he died, but whether it is or not, Jesus did die—for you and for me. The Edicule covers the site of traditional tomb, but behind it, inside the Syrian chapel, is access to 1st century tombs which are still intact. They confirm that this was, at the time of Christ, a place for the dead—but Jesus changed that forever when he was raised from the dead and we were raised with him!

One of my favorite places in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the Chapel of Adam (lower photo). The Orthodox Churches believe that Adam was buried beneath the spot where Jesus would eventually be crucified and that his blood from the cross soaked into the a crack in the rock and flowed down to cover the bones of Adam buried there long before. Now, that's a theory that would be impossible to know or prove. But that's not the point, theologically they are right. Jesus' blood poured out in his death did reach all the way back to cover the sin of Adam. It also reaches forward to cover sin I have not yet committed. For me, the Chapel of Adam celebrates the absolute once-for-all full sufficiency of Jesus' death and resurrection for every person who believes in him—past, present and future.

Sometimes, guilt from the past will come to mind and trouble you, but remember, the blood of Jesus covers that. At times you may spiral in guilt for falling again today to an easily besetting sin. But remember, Jesus died for that sin and he lives to give you his new life. Trust his death for your guilt and his resurrection to give you new life.



Day 28

Mount Arbel and the Great Commission

Read Matthew 28

Mount Arbel towers 1280 feet above the Sea of Galilee and the Plain of Gennesaret. It overlooks a natural gap between two cliffs which was the path of the international trade highway from Damascus through Capernaum and on to the Mediterranean Sea. This route was so important that when Herod the Great was consolidating his control of the region in BC, some of the last rebels he had to subdue were holed up in caves on the cliff face of Mount Arbel. From these caves above the narrow pass, they could effectively harass and hinder trade caravans on the highway below. Herod finally eliminated the rebels by lowering his soldiers over the cliff in iron cages to attack the caves from above.

Because of the amount of international trade regularly using this route, Levi had a lucrative customs tax office in Capernaum (Lk. 5:27) and the people in towns like Beth Saida, Capernaum and Magdala had regular interaction with people from distant lands and cultures. Galileans were more at ease among foreigners than people in Judea and Jerusalem. For this reason it's not surprising that Jesus focused a large part of his ministry in Galilee where the word of Him would travel fast and far. Similarly his disciples would later be able to take his gospel around the world using some of these same trade highways.

The top of Mount Arbel provides an incredible view of the highway below and all of lower Galilee. From here it is easy to remember Jesus feeding the 4000 here and the 5000 there, and out on the sea, Jesus calmed the storm and walked on the water. The Sermon on the Mount was just over there, and the Gerasene demoniac was directly across on the eastern shore.

Many scholars believe that Arbel is the mountain in Galilee where Jesus met his disciples after his resurrection. From here, where the disciples could recall all that he had done, Jesus commissions them for what they will do next. They will travel those same highways seen below, taking his gospel to the same international peoples they have become acquainted with through life in Galilee.

In a location like this, I like to get out on the edge, for the best view. My wife Julie normally does not, but I urged her to sit with me for this photo, in a place she would never pose by herself. It's a weak analogy (because I'm not Jesus), but it reminds me that we go, with Jesus, to places and for ministry that we would not have the courage to go on our own. Jesus calls us to go to people anywhere and everywhere, to bring them into God's family through faith in Jesus, and to build them up as followers in all the things that Jesus has commanded us. It's a tall order, whether across the street or around the world, but we can go to, bring in, and build up because Jesus has all authority, all power, and Jesus goes with us.

Lord, in the words of Isaiah I pray, "Here I am, send me." Give me courage to go to others around me, just as the disciples did. Help me to trust that you are with me always, also, even as you were with them.

Day 29

Road to Damascus

Read Acts chapter 9

From a lookout on Mt. Bental in the Golan Heights, you look down on a plain that stretches all the way to Damascus, the capitol of Syria. The town in the photo is the former Syrian capitol in this region, Quneitra. This town was destroyed and abandoned in the 1967 war when Israel took control of the Golan heights from Syria. The ruins sit in the midst of a no-man's land established by the UN in 1974. The shelled and machine-gunned ruins shows the ravages of war, that destroy what could have been a peaceful and happy town in a pleasant and prosperous area. Perhaps these ruins also depict the way in which sin ravages the human soul. The absence of God's peace brings this kind of destruction to lives and relationships, between individuals as well as nations.

If you look close, you can see a highway in the photo which follows the ancient "Road to Damascus." This was the road travelled by Saul of Tarsus in Acts chapter 9. After Saul had hunted down as many Christians as he could find in Jerusalem, many had fled to Damascus, and other cities. Breathing threats and murder, Saul followed on their trail. He carried letters from the High Priest which empowered him to arrest and bring captive to Jerusalem any followers of Jesus he could find among the Jewish population in Damascus. Word of his rampages had already preceded him in Damascus, perhaps the church had already been praying, "Lord save us from this man"—and so God did, by saving the man from whom they needed saving .

According to Ananias (Acts 9:13-14), these Christians in Damascus feared Saul and saw him as a dangerous threat and not a prospective believer. They were not asking God to save him, but to stop him. But God has a way of doing far more than we ask or even imagine. He stops Saul, saves Saul, and sends Saul—first to Damascus, then to the world.

Saul, who comes to Damascus intending to hunt down followers of Jesus, ends up preaching Jesus in Damascus and being hunted as a Christian himself. You see, Saul's heart was as hopeless as the desolate city of Quneitra, ruined and ravished by the violence of hate, until the Lord brought him peace. But it's not a peace like a UN armistice, that pauses the hostilities but cannot truly reconcile or rebuild the ruins. God, through the gospel of Jesus, will transform Saul into Paul, transforming the ruins of his life into a beautiful vessel which the Lord himself would fill and use.

When someone seems determined in their unbelief, or is even aggressively opposed to the gospel what will we do? It's seems impossible that they would believe, so why should I try? We can't know what the Lord might do, but we do know what the Lord can do. Be willing to tell your fears to the Lord, just as Ananias did. And as the Lord leads, be willing to share your faith in Jesus with the most unlikely listener, just as Ananias did. It's not likely that any of us will be another Apostle Paul. But it is likely, maybe even normal, that we be a bit more like Ananias—willing to share our faith with whoever God sends us to.



Day 30

Caesarea by the sea

Read Acts 24-26

Caesarea Maritima was originally built by King Herod in honor of Caesar and to bring the culture of Rome to Herod's side of the Mediterranean. The city included an opulent palace, a stadium for chariot races, a large enclosed harbor, and a theater where Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa I, gave his ill-fated speech in Acts 12. Herod's palace was slightly larger than a city block in area. The two-story residence wing jutted into the sea and enclosed a salt water pool as a central court. The attached administrative wing included a large colonnaded courtyard, a hall for official audiences (photo), offices, and storage and guard rooms (inset).

Caesarea, as the Roman counterbalance to Jewish Jerusalem in the 1st century, plays a recurring role in the book of Acts. It is here where Peter visits the Centurion in Acts chapter 10 and comprehends that the gospel is to go to both Jew and gentile alike. Paul would build on that foundation, passing through Caesarea many times in his missionary travels. Later, Paul would spend two years here, testifying of Jesus to Felix and Festus as well as Agrippa II, before his journey to Rome to appeal to Caesar.

The palace became the official residence of the Roman governors such as Pilate, Felix and Festus, therefore this is the location where Paul's testimony to Felix, then Festus and Agrippa took place (Acts 24-26). The inset photo shows guard rooms located near the audience hall, where prisoners would have been held while awaiting a decision. Paul could have resided for two years in one of these small rooms, receiving visitors and regularly summoned to speak of the gospel to Felix, whose corrupt heart needed forgiveness but wanted a bribe.

These audiences with Felix, and later with the new governor Festus and King Agrippa II would have occurred in the audience hall. While the walls and halls are gone, the paved floor on which Paul stood remains. These are the stones that heard Paul declare to Agrippa, the governor and his generals and the prominent people of the city, *"I pray to God that whether in a short or a long time, not only you but also all those who are listening to me today could become such as I am, except for these chains"* (26:29 NET). I'm moved by Paul's heart. He wants those who think they have it all, to have all the Lord's grace and blessing which Paul has, and yet he would spare them the sufferings and the chains. Like our Lord Jesus, Paul seems to value their good above his own.

Seeing this very spot, where Paul boldly proclaimed the gospel of Jesus before kings and governors gives me a new boldness. This is not just an evangelistic moment, this is Paul's destiny as God had before declared, *"he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the gentiles and kings and the children of Israel"* (Acts 9:15). God said it, and though it seemed hard to believe at the time, God has done it! And God continues to do it—you also are God's witness. These stones where Paul stood and witnessed to Jesus are like the stones where you and I live, and work, and meet and converse with others. May God also give us courage, to speak boldly as we ought to speak (Eph. 6:20).



