

It's been a couple of weeks since the return from this trip of a lifetime. When anyone plans a trip like this one, to Israel, there are usually a myriad of reasons why. You may make a "go" decision simply because you received an invitation from a church group, or maybe you needed a respite or vacation from the grind, or it could be you signed on for the novelty or out of curiosity. In our case it was to be a celebration of birthdays and the career completion of my life spent flying airplanes..... a great time with family and a grand way to usher in (with a bang) our new phase of life.....*retirement!* We were excited and somewhat studied up and thought it would be highly educational experience, but in reality it turned out to be so..... sooo much more!

With the wrong group, wrong guide or even the wrong attitude one could easily fall into somewhat of a trap and be amused at the various stops and sites as you might be at a theme park. But there is a deeper impact to be had.....much deeper, and it happened to me.

In our 7 days of touring we experienced the Bible come alive! Places, people and events we have read and studied about for a lifetime, suddenly *were right in front of us*. Many *many* locations, like the brief description of the following four, confirmed so much of our Biblical learnings.

Our very first stop was that ancient **ruins of Caesarea** where Herod the Great built a city with Roman architecture that Rome would be proud of. And by all accounts they were.



Herod's Palace (and subsequent prison for Paul) and the port at the city of Caesarea.

Interestingly enough the apostle, who was more responsible for the blossoming spread of Christianity than any other, the Apostle Paul, was imprisoned here and penned some of the Epistles. Now Paul's successful impact, from his communications and missionary trips, are really something to study. How could this little almost blind Jew, who became a convert leader, in the Christ following movement called "The Way," have that much influence around the globe? Wherever he ministered (if the people didn't try

to kill him) he left a wake of converted pagans and Jews into Christians. It's a rather remarkable case study.

Because Paul was Jewish yet was born in a Roman territory, he had the benefit and the equivalence of dual citizenship. Since he had Roman citizenship he had the unique ability, after arrest, to appeal to the Caesar. Paul did just that, and at this very location that we were standing, one of the most dramatic arguments ever made in scripture took place. The King of the region (over King Herod of Judea) was Agrippa and he was in Caesarea and questioned the prisoner. After Paul gave his most passionate case, King Agrippa gave answer to him with one of the most sad yet dramatic statements in the Bible. *"Then Agrippa said unto Paul, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian'."* Acts 26:28 I have always wished I could have been a fly on the wall to hear the unabridged and full argument that Paul had spoken to the King. It must have been something! I'm jostled out of my deep thought and I look about. Where our group is standing is the very place that this event happened 2000 years ago. Wow!

We soon visited other places just as historical, like **Mt Carmel**, where Elijah staged a competition between Baal and God Almighty. As it turns out it wasn't much of a competition because our God honored Elijah's faith with an incredible display of His almighty power, burning a water drenched altar including the rocks while Baal's 450 priests completely failed.





On top of Mt. Carmel, Pastor Jim sharing God's miraculous demonstration of power here.

Then off to the springs of Harod. **Gideon** had a miraculous victory in a battle near here at Mt Moreh against the Midianites, but in preparation he first obeyed God in pairing his 32,000 strong army down to an insanely small number, sending odds for victory out the window. He paired down his massive army by eliminating 22,000 who were simply afraid by sending them home. Then still further, he took the remaining 10,000 to the Spring of Harod (where we stand) and obeyed using a strange method to whittle away a whole lot more. He eliminated most by how they simply drank the water at Harod's springs. What did Gideon have left to battle against the massive Midianite's camp who were said to be numbered like the sands on the seashore? A mere 300! We are touching the waters from these very springs, imagining just how outnumbered these select warriors were as they were involved in this unique selection process. They then crossed the valley toward Mt Moreh and were given a God led victory over the Midianites for the ages.



Barb touching the clear waters of the Spring of Harod where Gideon and his 10,000 were.

Now at age 65, like many, everything I really needed to know about life, I learned not in Kindergarten but in Sunday School. David and Goliath, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and of course **Joshua at the battle of Jericho**, all forever memorable God lessons. We visited Jericho and the location of the infamous city where God brought the seemingly impenetrable walls down, handing the victory to Joshua's army. Over and over again man has witnessed God's power in action and on this trip to Israel openly on display for all to see.

These were just a *few* of the amazing locations, where God had moved, that we visited. Site after site where incredible, earth shattering, life changing events took place. All fantastic and impactful in their own right, **but three incredibly important places, that we visited, impressed me in a way that has had a permanent impact.** While we really enjoyed the whole itinerary, for me it was these next three special glimpses of grace from our Lord's sites that moved me the most. Travel with me to these sites where we – *experienced deeper ..... learned more ..... and walked further* with the One who came for us.

**Pan Temple at Caesarea-Philippi – *The challenge question for the ages***

The man from Galilee, ministered and performed miraculous healings all throughout His North shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Prior to His famous Transfiguration, He will take His Disciples to a pagan Roman city of Caesarea-Philippi. Here Jews would not live and frankly not often visit. But it is here where a spring, famously known as the “Gates of Hell,” Jesus would use to teach His disciples (and us) about Himself and His Church as He makes the point that the Church will be built on a strong rock solid foundation.



The ancient Pan (pagan) Temple backed up to this natural spring famously entitled the “Gates of Hell.”

His prophecy about the church enduring of course has been borne out and fulfilled completely. Yet at this city, as we stand at the opening of this famous spring, I believe Jesus asked the most pertinent question in all the Bible. It went like this: <sup>13</sup> *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”<sup>14</sup> They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”<sup>15</sup> “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Matt 16:13-15*

Peter, a simple rural fisherman from Galilee, was a follower, a witness and a believer and he answered here correctly. With open eyes and hearts we are confronted by the same Jesus 2000 years later. His teachings full of inspiration and truth available for all to see, His miracles being well documented, and His sacrifice on behalf of those He loves, simply astounding! That same Jesus who lived, walked, worked and ministered through ancient Palestine, is still ministering to us today. The Apostle John's account of the Gospel ends with this verse: <sup>25</sup> *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. John 21:25*

What is His enduring influence?

- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history.
- Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, “The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy.”
- His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals.
- Schools, hospitals, and humanitarian works have been founded in his name. Over 100 great universities — including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford — were begun by his followers.
- The elevated role of women in Western culture traces its roots back to Jesus. (Women in Jesus' day were considered inferior and virtual nonpersons until his teaching was followed.)
- Slavery was abolished in Britain and America due to Jesus' teaching that each human life is valuable.

Amazingly, Jesus made all of this impact as a result of just a three-year period of public ministry.

But with all of this said, there are these words that are indeed THE question confronting us all. Ever since Jesus entered this world, it has always been about this.

Who – is -- He?

It's His most penetrating question and the same one He asks you and I today;

*“But what about you?” He asks. “Who do you say I am?”*

Well ???

**Mt of Olives – ‘Oh, Jerusalem.....,’ Triumphant Entry –**

*The greatest gift-rejected*

Striking is the view. Except for the Turk's and Ottoman's restoration/remodeling of the mount, and of course the Dome of the Rock in the place of the Temple itself, the view toward the West over the Kidron valley and into old Jerusalem and its famous Temple mount, is virtually the same that Jesus would have had in His day. That struck me to the core.



Behind us, the view to the West from Mt of Olives over the Kidron Valley toward old Jerusalem

I stood on this mount looking to the West and my eyes were filled with what the rural country Galilean, Jesus, saw standing there with a spirit full of mission and eyes full of pain. Why did He hurt? It's recorded that Jesus cried over Jerusalem three times. This is the capital of His people. His eyes teared because Jerusalem needed change and His cry to repent and follow was rejected. Jerusalem needed a savior, yet with the Son of God right in their midst, they could not see. His people were rejecting the guidance and love of God and it pained Him deeply.

Today we look at our cities, at our country, and we cry out for change. Repentance simply means turning, and we intuitively want things to 'turn around,' yet we do not see it come. Our angst is but a fraction of what our Lord felt as He contemplated Jerusalem and the world beyond. No wonder Christ was called the man of sorrows. Nazareth (His childhood hometown) rejected and tried to kill Him, Capernaum (His adult ministry head quarters) closed their eyes to Him, and Jerusalem (the capital of His people) condemned Him to death by crucifixion. All this as today as we still reject Him and much of our world's spiritual suffering is a result of it.

Ironically, folks who heard or saw His miracles welcomed Him to the City on the Triumphant entry (a path down the Mt Olives to the Eastern gate that we walked). They saw Him as their new potential King who could solve their political problems and gain their independence from Rome. Just a few short days later, however, when it was realized that this Galilean had upset the religious order, He would be cursed, spat upon and condemned. It is this place, the Mt of Olives where I'm standing, that carries all the

import. The visuals of course are amazing, but it's the history and prophecy that literally stopped and stunned me. P.S. The Temple Mount's Eastern gate has been sealed shut since AD 1540–41 by order of Suleiman the Magnificent, a sultan of the Ottoman. Why? So that no Jewish Messiah will ever enter the Temple mount again. Influence of Jesus? Without a doubt.

At this site, on the Mt of Olives, **Christ came** with the Triumphant Entry Matt 21. Later after resurrection, **Christ Ascended here**. Acts 1:9-12. And, even more incredible, **Christ will one day return** here. Zech 14:1-4 It is here where God reached toward the recalcitrant world in love, by sending His Son, yet God's gift was rejected and in many cases still is. It is here where that same Son will persevere, leaving His throne in glory, to return. As I stand, my mind is racing..... my heart is full..... and my songs are filled with hymns like; *"To God be the glory, great things He hath done, So loved He the world....."*

### **Jesus Path to Condemnation – *The submission to agony and humility***

In the garden proximity we sat among beautiful very old olive trees and in the quietness the pall of Christ's burden descends upon us. When He was here, many events took place in a rather short period of time. He healed, He taught, and He prayed. It was His prayer here that moved me the most. We sat and pondered how Jesus, the Son of God, knowing His own future and wrestling with the weight of this burden that He was about to carry was stressed to the point that "His sweat became like great drops of blood." He even asked His Father if there could be another way? Yet, He submitted. How incredibly empathetic I felt at this spot as I was deep in a prayer of thanksgiving, *"And can it be, that I should gain, an interest in my Saviour's blood....."*

Jesus prayer overwhelmed me with His amazing grace and convicts me of personal need to obey and submit. I was blessed to pray where Christ prayed and where He gave us the ultimate example of obedience and submission to the will of the Father. In prayer, His example exposed in me my own personal unruliness and disobedience of heart, and laid bare my own unwillingness to submit. The sobering and convicting worship of this moment will stick with me for life.





Our visit among the ancient olive trees in a small section of the Mt of Olives preserved as a quiet garden area.

As meditation continues, bursting into the solitude of the moment inside our mind's eye, *is the arrest*. One can only imagine all the commotion and drama surrounding this famous arrest. His path to condemnation would now begin. While we are still in the garden, He was next marched off to a hearing in front of the Chief Priest of the Sanhedrin Caiaphas. So we next travel to this home of the Chief Priest which has been re-discovered, positively identified and uncovered. Ruins of the foundation and basement prison and deep dark dungeon (reserved for the worst of the worst) are now fully exposed and accessible to pilgrims. As we take in the sights surrounding Caiaphas home, it had been some time since we were soberly in the garden, yet my heart was still heavy in deep thought about the crush our Lord was experiencing. The separation... the loneliness.....the betrayal..... and the hate!

While we stood in the dungeon of Caiaphas palace, we had a few moments to take it in. Pastor Jeremy asked me to read the very sorrowful Psalm 88 for our group. Taking in all that Jesus was going through, and will, then reading these appropriate words of sorrow, pain, loneliness and lament, became a very emotional journey for me. No, His passion was not yet finished, His agony not yet full, yet we all know His path and how it will end. And soon the Son of God would take upon Him the sin and burdens of the world in an agonizing yet victorious event.



Caiaphas house and basement dungeon where Jesus may have been held. Psalm 88 read here.

Our group follows His “path” and we transfer now to the famed Antonio Fortress where the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate will be found. Now we are unmistakably at the site where Jesus was unjustly accused and complicitly sentenced. As we passed through the fortress maybe some, even empathetically, felt a stripe or two. And all the while the Man of Miracles, who daily exhibited his Omnipotence by His miracles, could have commanded another. As the famous Hymn goes, “*He could have called 10,000 angels.....*” But He didn’t and He knowingly, willingly and submissively went to the cross and died for you and me.

*“How deep the Father's love for us  
How vast beyond all measure  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure!”*

I suspect few would doubt the historical truth of the cross. However, many have not thought through nor believe in Easter. I do! The story’s final ending has not fully been written yet but as followers we know that the tomb was **NOT** the end of Jesus! He arose and left the empty tomb to minister to His disciples

and many others before ascending to His Father. Our group even visited a site or two where He was seen alive documented by many, ***after His death!*** This is one of the aspects of Christianity that is unique among world religions. Our God, in Christ, conquered the tomb. His resurrection power makes all the difference. This is why Christians believe and why we (and I) have hope!

This October trip to Israel with opportunities to visit locations where Jesus walked, ministered and performed miracles, we knew would be special. But these 3 glimpses of His grace have forever drawn me closer to Him..... the Way.....the Lord.....the Christ!

*“Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne.”*

Mark Sztanyo