

I tried to work on a sermon from where we left off in Ephesians, but my heart was just too overwhelmed with the goodness of God on the trip to not take one Sunday to share with you all the wonderful things God blessed us with on the trip. It rained there up until the day we arrived, and was beautiful until we got in the bus to leave and it started raining again. God truly was looking out for us every step of the way. Rather than go over all that we saw and learned, I just want to share with you a few of the highlights that were so moving to me.

The first was our guide in Jordan, Fadi, which means Savior. He was a dear and Spirit filled believer. It was not so much in the things he said, but in his whole demeanor. The entire group sensed it. Don't think that because you aren't sharing the plan of salvation with everyone that you meet that you aren't a witness. He shared with us that Muslims in Jordan consider Christians to be honest and hardworking. That is their testimony as a whole. They are sought after as accountants because of their integrity. Don't we wish that was true here in our country as well.

Though there are limited opportunities for Christians in Jordan and Israel, and many are leaving to live in countries where there are fewer restrictions, the light of those that remain is shining even brighter. Our guide in Israel was a believer and had already moved his family to Canada. Christians in these countries we visited are becoming a smaller and smaller minority.

On the other hand, there are an increasing number of Jews and Muslims that are finding Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Our Israel guide, Raouf, was born in a Christian family in the old city of Jerusalem, but it wasn't until one particular tour in 2009 that he gave his heart to Christ. Though he could tell you from memory what passage took place at which particular site, and just what it was that Jesus said there, he did not have a relationship with Christ. One pastor leading a group asked Raouf if he had surrendered his heart to Jesus. Raouf realized he had religion but not a relationship, and so he accepted Jesus as the Lord of his life.

The Schofields joined us for our Jordan portion of the tour. They are doing great! They worship with a small group of about a dozen believers and every couple is from a different nation! That is so typical of what we experienced on this tour where everywhere you turned you were hearing another language, yet every tongue was praising our Lord Jesus.

In Petra, Mac shared with us the connection of the site with Scripture. Petra and Mount Nebo were incredible sites, but again I must say that the most amazing thing in Jordan

was the guide, brother Fadi. He took us to a shop that employed the disabled to make intricate mosaic tiles. Many of the ancient church sites had beautiful mosaic floors and this shop was carrying on the tradition. I had no idea that we would be stopping there, and of course the guides want to have us shop as commissions are a part of their wages. But this was a very special stop that brought tears to our eyes because we recognized that it was ordained by God. You see, one of Kim's assignments at Rainbow Acres it so to oversee the craft time. And can you guess what craft they are going to put more emphasis on? Yes, tile mosaics. So she picked up some great pointers in how they do their work and received encouragement that God is in the midst of all we do. Your days are not a coincidence. When you are open to the will of God and surrendered to serving Him, He uses everything to advance His kingdom; and sometimes we become wonderfully aware that we are part of something much bigger than us.

Another experience that was not so much in what we saw but what we experienced is being all day with a group of believers. As we traveled some long days, we shared the snacks we had with one another, the inspiration we were seeing, and the lessons we were learning. We became a little church body. I was so pleased with how everyone was willing to look after each other and help those who were weak. We did a lot of walking, some days a number of miles. It was a miracle that the oldest among us was able to keep up, but it was partly the miracle of love that stronger ones came alongside the weak.

Mariko had an asthma attack as we were leaving Petra and couldn't make the climb back out. The biggest guy with us offered to carry her on his back but fortunately there was a horse just around the bend she could ride to the bus area. They made us a deal on two horses so I got to ride out like Indiana Jones -but without the hat.

That night we crossed the Jordan and arrived in Bethlehem. The next morning we looked out from the area of the Shepherds' caves to the fields of Bethlehem and imagined the shepherds flooded with the light of the angel and then the heavenly host praising God. We could imagine them awestruck and running toward the manger that we would visit later. Kim shared with us the Old Testament background for this site.

Then we went to Caesarea on our way to Nazareth. Just one year ago, the dungeons where Paul was held were discovered. On the walls of one of those holding cells was written the name Paulos, the Apostle we read about in the New Testament. In our lifetime, the dedication of the theater was found a stone inscribed with the name of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor that tried Jesus. One of the things we learned on the trip was that skeptics are having a difficult time finding things in the New Testament that are not yet confirmed by archeology.

In Nazareth we had the privilege, thanks to an introduction by the Hansens, to visit the Nazareth Baptist School. It is ranked 4th in the nation and has a standing waiting list of applicants as it is always filled to capacity. They are planning on moving to the outskirts of the city where they can accept more students. About 40% of the student body are Muslims and they all attend Bible class taught by a missionary. There was supposed to be a pilgrim group from Kentucky there to bring the message, but they were delayed. We walked in just in time for the 7th and 8th grade chapel and I was handed the mic and told I had 45 minutes. I shared from Romans 5 about the death we inherited from the old Adam and the righteousness that is ours in the new Adam. It was all translated into Arabic. We sang with the students and then sang them a special.

That afternoon we went to the Jordan for baptisms. I was pleasantly surprised to find that most of our group wanted to be baptized as a sign of recommitment. We gathered by the Jordan in our white gowns as each shared why they wanted to be baptized again. It was a very moving time with lots of tears of joy and gratitude. Then as lots of people looked on, we went into the chilly waters of the Jordan and went in and out of the water as a sign of our death to our old life and being raised to new life in Jesus. But the best was still to come.

As we gathered outside the entrance we got out the guitar and began singing praises to God. Others gathered around and sang with us. One young couple were locals. While we were singing, the husband shouted out, "I love Americans!" His wife had just been baptized which must mean she had accepted Jesus as her Messiah.

Every trip has its special moment when it seems the Holy Spirit descends and I am speechless. This was that moment on this trip. I tried to sing and but my heart was too overwhelmed even for song, but everyone else was pitching in while I kept strumming. Believers recognize the tune even when they don't recognize the words. Some sing along in their own language. Before we knew what was happening, everyone was in a big circle with our new found brothers and sisters in Christ dancing the hora. It is typically danced at Jewish weddings, and this was after all a very Jewish wedding, Jesus and His bride. It didn't hit me until I was preparing this sermon how completely appropriate it was.

One evening in Tiberius, we had the pleasure of meeting an Arab couple that were local evangelists. They shared with us their ministry and how increasing numbers of people were finding Jesus as their Savior. Spirit of Martyrdom had provided me with DVDs of testimonies called More Than Dreams, which we passed out to people we met, including our Muslim and Christian bus drivers. We also gave out a couple of Arabic New Testaments and Jesus DVDs.

The next part I share with you I need to do so in a way that won't breach the person's confidence. This person was very influential and involved in the government. While at lunch, they sat down beside me and shared about a vision they had of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. I could tell that it had been a very moving experience for them. I asked if they had become a messianic believer. They said they were not – yet, and explained what a difficult decision it was for them. Let's call the person Esther, God knows who she is, and remember to pray for her and her sister to take that step that Raouf took, of surrendering their life to Jesus. They asked if they could attend one the teachings with us as they "loved to hear the words of Jesus." What a blessing to have that experience. Our guide will follow up when he is near that person's home town.

On the trip to West Africa I had seen that Muslims were having dreams and visions of Jesus, but it was exciting to hear that Jews are being personally touched as well! I believe God is stirring hearts in these last days and reaching out to draw people to Himself as the time draws near.

On the plane, one of our sisters met a Muslim woman, again we will not give the details for their safety. She was looking into the possibility of getting her family out of one of these dangerous countries as she could see war is imminent. She reads the Bible as well as the Koran, which shows she is open to the Lord. Let's remember to pray for her and her family as well. I don't think we meet these people by coincidence. God is giving us a chance to pray His will into their lives. I believe Ezekiel 37-39 is drawing near. The pieces are all falling into place and people are sensing the urgency of the moment.

From the Galilee we went to Jericho and then back to Bethlehem and Bethany. Jory shared with us an excellent message at Lazarus tomb, describing how the bone boxes of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary had been discovered in the mid 1800s. Then we went up to Jerusalem for our final three days. We were often confronted by beggars, and that reminded us of what it must have been like in the days of Jesus.

We saw the foundations of the Temple wall deep underground, the Pool of Siloam and the recently discovered 100 foot wide stairway upon which our Lord ascended and descended from the Temple. We visited the Temple Mount and pondered how the prophecies would one day soon come to pass. But the godincidence came when we were standing in the security line to the Temple Mount. I happened to be beside a guide that our guide knew as a secret believer. She was Jewish but had come to trust in Yeshua ha Meshiach as her Savior. We started talking and she certainly was open with me about her faith.

Most of you know that I am excited about how God is touching Muslims with dreams and visions. I started talking to her about this and she shared that Israel is the best

place in the Middle East to reach Muslims for Christ. There is even a man in the old city that sets up a table every day to distribute literature to Muslims who are seeking the truth. I'm hoping David and I can go sometime soon if the Lord is willing and see how we can encourage and support those who are sharing the Lord with those seeking the truth in the Muslim communities.

The final days in Jerusalem are always moving. We saw the ancient Jericho road that Jesus went up for the final time into Jerusalem. We talked about the fear the disciples had of what was about to happen. We sat in a private olive grove at Gethsemane and looked across to the gate where the soldiers would have exited the walled city with torches and lanterns. We walked part of the route the soldiers would have taken Jesus bound down the Kidron Valley to Annas' and Caiaphas' home. We saw the interrogation room where criminals were tied and beaten. We read Psalm 88 in the pit where Jesus would have been held.

Then we went to the place of the trial, the scourging, and the road of the cross which ended at Golgotha. We went to the place of the tomb. It was all so sobering and sad until we realized, "He is not here! He is risen, just as He said!"

Finally we celebrated communion together in a garden by an ancient tomb and rejoiced in the fact that we are the bride of our risen Lord and Savior! Like the betrothed of long ago, we anxiously await the sound of the trumpet that will announce the coming of the Bridegroom. Is there oil in your jar? Are you prepared for His coming?

Our faith has been bolstered by the evidence we saw. Seeing the places where the miracles took place and sharing the Scriptures there encouraged us. Meeting the local living stones was a joy and blessing to us. But the greatest encouragement was His own presence in our midst, just as it is with us here today as we worship Him. And now, let us celebrate communion, which reminds us of the price Jesus paid to make us His bride. It is His sacrifice on our behalf that makes us a family and gives us the hope and peace that surpasses our limited understanding.