

Why Every Christian Should Visit Israel

From the moment you enter Jerusalem, there is an immediate sense that this place is different from anywhere else on earth. You can feel it in the air—that sense of prophetic destiny: past, present and future all converging. As you walk through the Old City and experience places like the Pools of Bethesda, the City of David, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, you feel transported back in time.

This is a place God has marked. You see it all around you. The Muslim call to prayer erupts over the loudspeakers from the mosques, drowning out the sounds of Hebrew prayer coming from the Orthodox yeshivas and the devotionals pastors are teaching to their assembled groups gathered around them. Religious fervor and political tension are everywhere. This place is intense—and I love it. It stimulates all my senses. I have the feeling that at any moment something may happen. Maybe the Messiah will return? And if He does, it's going to be here.

The world's three major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—all claim Jerusalem as central to their faith. For Jews, Jerusalem is the capital of a land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants nearly 4,000 years ago as an everlasting possession. Since the time of King David, the great ruler who reigned from Jerusalem during Israel's golden age as a world power (around 1,000 B.C.), the city has been a focal point of the Jewish faith. Over their 70-year exile in Babylon from 586-516 B.C., the Jews' longing to return to their homeland was reflected in their prayers. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. If I do not remember you, let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not have Jerusalem as my highest joy" (Ps. 137:5-6). During their 2,000-year dispersion as they

wandered from nation to nation, the Jewish people never lost hope that one day they would return to their homeland. Every time a Jewish person confesses the Shema (the confession of the one true God) they face toward Jerusalem in whatever country from which they are praying.

For Christians, Jerusalem is the place where Jesus celebrated His final Passover Seder with His disciples (also known as the Last Supper), was condemned to die by Pontus Pilate, was ridiculed and beaten, died on the cross for our sins, was buried, rose again and after 40 days ascended to His Father from the Mount of Olives. Jerusalem is also where the Spirit of God was poured out in the temple on Shavuot (Pentecost) and 3,000 were saved, marking the official birth of the New Testament church.

But Israel isn't just about Jerusalem. The entire country is a walk-through museum of the Bible. From the Sea of Galilee and Megiddo in the north down to the Be'er Sheva and the Negev Desert in the south and everywhere in between, the entire land is loaded with ancient sites mentioned by name throughout the Old and New Testament.

For over two years, since the outbreak of the pandemic in March of 2020, Israel completely shut down to tourists. And until just a few months ago, only those who were vaccinated could enter the country. But Israel has now lifted this ban, and tourism is finally back in full swing. So now is the time to go!

Following are six reasons why every Christian should visit Israel:

1) Touring Israel will transform your understanding of the Bible. When you read in the Bible about David slaying Goliath, Elijah defeating the prophets of Baal, Gideon and the 300 defeating the Midianite army, the disciples battling the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus turning over the

tables of the money changers outside the temple—you can see with your own eyes where these events actually happened. You can read the Bible accounts on the very spot they took place thousands of years ago! From the first time I toured Israel, seeing these sites in person completely revolutionized and transformed my Bible reading. Imagine standing on the top of Megiddo (Armageddon) and scanning the sprawling fields of the Jezreel Valley below that run for miles toward Jerusalem as you read from Revelation 16 and 19 about the final battle.

I've been on the Sea of Galilee when the winds suddenly began to gust and the water became turbulent. I now understand why the disciples were afraid because I've experienced it myself, albeit I was in a much larger and safer boat than they had. By the way, make sure you go to see the Jesus boat at the Yigal Alon Museum in Kibbutz Ginosar near Capernaum. It is an actual boat from the time of Jesus, recovered from the bottom of the Sea of Galilee and painstakingly restored.

Before I went to Israel, every time I read the Sermon on the Mount, I had a mental picture of Jesus standing on top of a mountain, teaching the large crowd below. But once I saw the topography around the Sea of Galilee, I had a completely different picture, one I now believe is accurate. Jesus was not teaching the people by standing above them; he was teaching them from below.

These are just a few examples; I could give you a hundred others. I'll summarize by saying that touring the Holy Land and seeing the very places the great stories of the Bible took place will connect you with the text in an entirely new way. It is the equivalent of seeing a movie on location as opposed to reading a screenplay. That's why every serious student of the Bible needs to go to Israel.

2) Israel is the only place you can walk where Jesus walked. Contrary to esoteric writings that claim Jesus traveled during his "hidden years" to India or other remote places of the

world, other than a brief trip to Egypt to escape Herod's death decree as a toddler, Jesus spent his entire life in Israel. One of the most amazing experiences for us as followers of Yeshua is to retrace the life of our Savior. The New Testament (based on prophecies found in the Old) serves as a virtual travel guide. We know from the Gospels where he was born: Bethlehem, which incidentally means "House of Bread" in Hebrew. You can walk through the Church of the Nativity, built over the cave the Catholic and Orthodox Church believe is the actual site of His birth.

I prefer to visit one of the natural grottoes found in the shepherds' fields outside the town that were used in Bible times as simple shelters to shield shepherds from the elements. This will give you a great visual to remember every time you read the accounts of His birth. Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, remains a functioning city today. Nazareth Village is a fabulous attraction run by Israeli Jewish believers in Jesus who reenact the experience of walking into a first-century Galilean village.

At Capernaum, you can visit the remains of the ancient synagogue where Jesus began His public ministry. Although the synagogue itself is a bit newer (sixth century), it is built over the remains of the actual synagogue Jesus Himself was in. We know this because the original floor was excavated and is visible beneath.

Although some of the other traditional sites may not be the exact spot where Jesus walked on the water; fed the 5,000; taught the multitudes or healed Peter's mother-in-law, the Sea of Galilee is, without doubt, the exact place. Make sure you take a boat trip and meditate on the fact that you may be crossing exactly where Jesus once crossed over as He did so many times almost 2,000 years before you!

Other sites you will want to visit to follow in the footsteps of Jesus include the Mount of Beatitudes, Caesarea-Philippi

(also known as Banias), Bethany, Jericho and of course, everything relating to His final days in Jerusalem: the upper room on Mt. Zion, the Gardens of Gethsemane (where you will see with your own eyes olive trees dating back to the time of Jesus), the Via Dolorosa (the Way of the Cross, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), the Western Wall/temple area and the Garden Tomb.

3) Visiting Israel will restore your faith in miracles. You will be surprised as you travel through the Holy Land just how small this country really is. The entire country, roughly the size of New Jersey, is a tiny island surrounded by a sea of Islamic nations. And since the reestablishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 until recently, all these surrounding nations sought to wipe Israel off the map. Countries such as Iran are still fully committed to this, as are terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The entire Arab world, in fact most of the world, never thought this start-up nation would survive. What they did not understand is that God declared He would preserve the Jewish people and would one day bring them back to their land.

As you tour this land, you will come to understand more fully with each day what a modern miracle this country really is. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, once said, "In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles." As you listen to the history of the seemingly insurmountable challenges of the 19th-century settlers who first had a vision to restore the land of Israel and the incredible odds against them that the fledgling state of Israel faced in 1948, along with the Six-Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973, your trust in the faithfulness of a miracle-working God will be supercharged.

4) A trip to Israel will connect you with your Israeli family in the faith. One of the greatest opportunities many Christians miss when they go on an Israel tour is the chance to connect with their Israeli brothers and sisters in the

faith. Today, there are an estimated 16,000-25,000 Israeli believers in Yeshua. There are now Messianic Jewish and Arab congregations in almost every city in the country, and more are popping up all the time. The body in Israel is growing and making a greater and greater impact on society, often through humanitarian projects helping the poor, single mothers, new immigrants and victims of terrorism and missile attacks. Seeing Jews and Arabs walking together in love and unity because their lives were transformed by the power of God is a marvelous thing to experience. The growing number of Jewish believers in Israel is a direct fulfillment of last-days Bible prophecy.

5) Going to Israel is a tangible way to bless Israel. Before COVID shut down Israel, tourism accounted—directly or indirectly—for close to 230,000 jobs, or approximately 5% of Israel's total employment. Both 2018 and 2019 were banner years, with over 4.9 million tourists visiting this tiny nation in 2019, 12% more than the year before. The nation's tourism industry produced \$ billion of revenue for Israel in 2019.

As you can imagine, with the loss of so many jobs, Israel has suffered severe economic hardship. By going on a tour to Israel, you can play a direct role in helping to rebuild Israel's economy and restore jobs to thousands of workers who desperately need to support their families.

6) If you wait, it may be too late. The Bible is clear: when Jesus returns, He is not coming back to New York. He's not coming to London or Paris or Rome. And He's not coming back to some metaphorical "Jerusalem in the sky"—He is coming back to Jerusalem. Scripture says before He returns, there will be growing instability and global upheaval. The COVID pandemic should be a wake-up call to all of us that the world can change overnight. If a trip to Israel is not on your bucket list, may I suggest you reconsider? The experience will forever change your life.

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