

Finding Jesus in the Holy Land

Christian Pilgrims will encounter the Holy Spirit's presence when they visit the places the Savior walked.

People who visit the Holy Land generally fall into one of two categories: tourists or pilgrims. Tourists go to see various sites, buy souvenirs, take photos and videos, and then return home to share with family and friends their pictures, purchases and adventures. Pilgrims go to experience God—and their lives are transformed in the process.

Peter Miano, executive director of the Society for Biblical Studies, made this observation: "Tourists pass through places. Pilgrims let places pass through them, allowing their hearts to be changed."

During the last 30 years, I have taken many people to the Holy Land, most of whom decided to go as pilgrims. Each one experienced a unique encounter with the Lord at some point during the trip.

On my first visit in 1976, I was surprised to see how small the Holy Land really is. From Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south is approximately 100 miles (see Judg. 20:1). The distance from the River Jordan on the east to the Mediterranean coast on the west varies between 30 to 50 miles. The total area of Israel is about the same as that of New Jersey.

But within this small bridge of land between Europe, Asia and Africa, I discovered 9,000-foot snow-covered Mount Hermon; the

Dead Sea, about 1,300 feet below sea level and surrounded by the Judean wilderness; the rolling hills and fertile valleys west of the Sea of Galilee; terraced orchards, vineyards and mountains around Jerusalem; the breathtaking city of Zion; coastal beaches; and plains filled with citrus orchards. This variety creates more than four weather zones at any given moment.

The topography and climate of Israel is so integral to biblical accounts that I gained a much deeper understanding of the Bible just by seeing the land. Many have commented after returning from the trip that as they now read the Bible, they can see in living color the settings of the stories and sometimes hear the sounds of the Middle East.

If this seems a small place for God to call His land, consider that the place where Jesus spent most of His three years in ministry was a little triangular area on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, often referred to as “the evangelical triangle.” It encompassed the three cities of Bethsaida (the birthplace of Peter, Andrew and Philip); Capernaum (the home of James, John and Matthew); and Korazim, up the hill from the sea. Within this small, three-mile-square area, Jesus fed the 5,000, taught the Sermon on the Mount, did most of His miracles, found most of His disciples, did much of His teaching, spent time alone with His Father in prayer and selected Capernaum as His adopted home after being cast out of Nazareth’s synagogue.

In 2001, while lecturing in Galilee, I walked the evangelical triangle to get the feel of distance and to discover the paths Jesus had taken. My guide was a Jewish teenager whose entire family had become believers in Jesus as their Messiah.

The two of us walked where Jesus had walked. It took just 90 minutes to walk from the location of the feeding of the 5,000 along the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida. And from Capernaum up the hill to Korazim, it took about 45 minutes by a longer path in rainy weather, and only 25 minutes by a shorter path through a pasture when it was dry. One of the great experiences I had while taking these walks was reading the biblical accounts of Jesus' ministry right where it actually happened.

One recent pilgrim shared how much the time in Galilee meant to her. "Walking the contours of the land, seeing the Sea of Galilee as [Jesus] did, visiting the solitary place where He went alone for prayer gave me a much more intimate encounter with the Lord. It was like visiting with Him in His home."

There is much to see in Capernaum as you reflect on the miracles that happened there—the healings of the demonized man (see Mark 1:21-28), Peter's mother-in-law (see Mark 1:30), the paralyzed man lowered through the roof (see Mark 2:1-2), and the raising of Jairus' daughter (see Luke 8:41-46). And in Korazim, one can see a "Moses seat" in the synagogue where the rabbi sat to teach (see Matt. 23:2-3), and the outline of a father's house and courtyard that is mentioned in John 14:1-3.

Ancient Bethsaida was recently discovered after excavations that began in 1987. First century Bethsaida, the village visited by Jesus, was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 67 and completely buried by an earthquake 48 years later.

Bethsaida is now being restored by archeologists. It is the only one of the three cities in the evangelical triangle that today is just as Jesus knew it. You can literally walk on the same streets Jesus walked on.

In contrast, first century Capernaum and Korazim have been destroyed and rebuilt, with many of the present ruins from the third century or later. But Jesus predicted this destruction. In spite of the many miracles He did in these three cities, many still did not believe in Him (see Matt. 11:20-24).

A highlight for me and many others is the Primacy of Peter. This small church along the Galilee shoreline marks the place where Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection (see John 21).

Jesus built a charcoal fire that morning, reminding Peter of another charcoal fire in Jerusalem where he had denied the Lord. Jesus allowed Peter to profess his love for Him three times (see John 21:15-19) and caused Peter's memory of shame and guilt to be overshadowed by a new memory of forgiveness.

He also gave Peter a new commission, to be a shepherd of His flock. Overlooking the Sea of Galilee is a beautiful statue of Peter on his knees before the Lord, with Jesus handing him a shepherd's staff.

Because many who travel with me struggle with the thought that they have failed the Lord so often He can no longer use them, we stop there on the beach to read the story of Jesus and Peter, pause for a time of confession and repentance, and experience the Lord's cleansing and renewing.

Have you ever wondered how Jesus could address large crowds without a sound system? One day on the Golan Heights, I asked a group of Christian college students from California what had been their most amazing experience in five weeks of study in

Israel.

Several students excitedly mentioned their discovery that morning of a natural acoustical area where Jesus could address more than 5,000 people at one time. Apparently Israeli sound technicians had already done sound tests in the area.

My wife and I immediately drove to the location on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, just south of Capernaum. Standing some 40 yards from the shore, at the edge of a farmer's field, we could overhear two fishermen conversing some 50 feet offshore.

Jesus knew where these natural acoustical areas were that would allow Him to address the multitudes. We read in Luke 5:1-3 that He took Peter's boat offshore to speak when large crowds pressed upon Him. The field where we were standing could easily have handled more than 5,000 men plus women and children.

Beside the hardened path along Galilee's shore was a pile of rocks, with thorns and thistles at the edge of the fertile field. Could this be the very location where Jesus told the parable of the sower? (See Matt. 13:1-9.)

I am always fascinated by ancient Caesarea Philippi, at the base of Mount Hermon on the northern border of Israel. This is an area of pagan worship, where Jesus took His disciples to reveal His final mission.

Canaanites built many altars nearby to Baal, the fertility god, where child sacrifice and temple prostitution was practiced. The Greeks followed suit, building in Caesarea a

temple to their fertility god, Pan. They also practiced child sacrifice and temple prostitution, seeking Baal's blessing of rain for their crops.

Later, Herod the Great built a temple in front of the cave for the worship of Caesar Augustus as god. Herod called the area Caesarea, "Caesar's City," in honor of the emperor. After his death, Herod's son, Philip, enlarged this Roman temple and renamed the area Caesarea Philippi, to distinguish it from the other Caesarea, Herod's capitol on the Mediterranean.

Why did Jesus take His disciples to this remote location, the site of occult pagan worship by Canaanites, Greeks and Romans, to reveal His true identity and mission just before His final journey to Jerusalem and the cross? I believe He may have been saying, "Wherever paganism rules and hell is in your face, there is where I am going to build My church, and the powers of hell itself cannot stop Me."

Talk about experiencing God's mission in an unexpected place. And yet think of how many places there are around the world today where the gospel of Christ is confronting the "gates of hell" and the prisoners are being freed.

Another special place for many is the Sea of Galilee, where they can sit silently in a wooden boat, praying for the Lord to call them to follow Him into new, risky ventures, just as He challenged Peter to come to Him walking on the water (see Matt. 14:22-33); or they can board a commercial fishing boat, as I once did, to catch sardines near the eastern shore, where tradition says Jesus fed more than 4,000 Gentiles with seven loaves and a few small fish (see Mark 8:5-7).

The fish Jesus multiplied were sardines, just like the ones I helped catch off that very shore 2,000 years later. These types of experiences make the Bible come alive.

Many of the pilgrims I've taken to the Holy Land sense God's presence at the Jordan River, where we renew our baptismal vows. Many have been healed, renewed, empowered and blessed—and amazed by the groups from all over the world that have come after us to be baptized or renew their vows as well.

Many also are deeply moved when we visit the House of Caiaphas in Jerusalem, where Jesus was taken prisoner the day before He died. In the dungeon prison beneath the high priest's home, Jesus was beaten by the high priest's soldiers and placed in a solitary confinement cell in pitch darkness (see Mark 14:65).

On one trip, a young man joined our group as we entered this rock cell. I read from Psalm 88, reflecting on how Jesus faced the rejection, betrayal and denial of His disciples that night. He must have experienced depression as He awaited death, according to the psalm.

We turned off the lights and paused in silent prayer in the dark cell. After we turned on the lights everyone left quietly, except this young man who remained on his knees, sobbing. I laid my hand on him and prayed.

A few minutes later, he looked up and said: "You do not know me. But I serve as chaplain in a maximum security prison in Texas. This coming Sunday, I am scheduled to go into death row.

"Jesus gave me a message for these men: 'Tell them that I

understand how they feel, for I suffered torture, rejection, depression and solitary confinement, even death on the cross ... for them. That is how much I love them.'"

That young chaplain certainly experienced the Lord's presence and a new commission for his ministry!

There are many other places where I and others have experienced God in the Holy Land: the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus went to pray; the Via Dolorosa, along which Jesus carried the cross; the Garden Tomb, including both Calvary and the empty tomb, where we celebrate the Lord's Supper; the teaching steps of the temple, where Peter preached on Pentecost; and the ritual cleansing pools, where 3,000 people were baptized after Peter finished his message.

On the final day of each tour, I take our groups through the Wadi Qelt, the valley of the shadow of death referred to in Psalm 23, and then we climb up the nearby Mount of Temptation overlooking ancient Jericho. The trail up the mount is a challenging, switchback path through a Greek Orthodox monastery built on the side of the cliff.

Inside the monastery is a cave where Jesus supposedly stayed during His 40 days in the wilderness (see Matt. 4:1-11). Exiting the back door of the monastery, we take a steep climb over rocks to the top of the mount, where from the ruins of a crusader fortress we can see for 360 degrees "the kingdoms of the world" Satan showed Jesus.

We also find some round, flat stones, the color and size of pita bread, similar to those the devil tried to tempt Jesus to turn into bread. A woman who traveled with me on one trip was

healed of deep grief and fear at this site.

Her experience was not unusual. On every tour I've led to the Holy Land, pilgrims have met God on a deep level. The Bible has come alive to them, and they have been challenged to new levels of discipleship. All these benefits await you as well. So don't hold back. The blessings are more than worth any challenges you may face in getting there.