

This One Decision Can Revolutionize Your Vision of God

Anyone who has been a churchgoer for very long knows about Holy Land tours. Visiting sites—including where Jesus was born, baptized, crucified, buried and appeared after His resurrection—has become a must-do experience. Pastors and Christian speakers lead believers by the busloads. *The Jerusalem Post* reports that a record four million tourists traveled to Israel in 2018—a whopping 61% of them were Christians.

For decades, I had wanted to go, not so much as a tourist, but as a pilgrim. Friends had come home from the Holy Land with stories about how their faith had blossomed at the Garden Tomb or strengthened at the Sea of Galilee. Some said they could feel God's presence or hear Him inwardly speaking to them. That's what I wanted.

But could flying halfway around the world really make the Bible come alive? How could my visit to the place where Jesus walked be more than a series of Instagram posts? How could I crack the code? A few months ago, I set out to find out. I had booked a space on a LifeWay tour called "The Word Alive." My hosts would be Lysa TerKeurst and Lisa Harper. The setup was promising.

Before I left the states, I was given a bonus. "Here, take Dallas' map of Israel," my friend Jane Willard said during a short stopover at her home in Southern California. Jane, who is Dallas Willard's lovely widow, handed me a Carta's Ancient and Modern version complete with short notes on archaeological sites and a location map of the biblical 12 tribes. I unfolded the map slowly, feeling much as I did the first time I read

her husband's book *The Divine Conspiracy*. There before my eyes was an old map of the Holy Land. I was fascinated. It looked as if it contained a secret that could change my world.

To that point, my faith journey had been much like my trip to Israel was turning out to be: me trying to read a map that didn't make total sense. I had often felt that way when reading Scripture. I knew there was deep meaning tucked into the passages, but I didn't completely understand all of the nuances. On the map, I recognized the Mediterranean Sea and the dot that located Jerusalem, but I didn't know what all the symbols in the legend meant. To go deeper, I needed to "crack the code."

Years ago, my spiritual mentor, James Bryan Smith, had pointed me to Dallas Willard and his book *The Divine Conspiracy*. I devoured every page and eventually became personal friends with Dallas and his wife. His message and his wisdom helped me "crack the code." The Bible came to life, and I was not the same. Now I held his Holy Land map in my hands. Would it have a similar effect?

Jane Willard reminded me that in Chapter 6 of Dallas's book *Renovation of the Heart*, he wrote that the single most important thing in a person's mind is his or her idea of God and the associated images. How would my pilgrimage to Israel further shape the image of Yahweh in my mind?

The day of my visit with Jane, we sorted through slide carousels to weed out pictures that wouldn't be needed at the Dallas Willard Center at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. Several shots were of a trip Jane and Dallas had taken to Israel, a long time ago. As we looked through the black-and-white slides, I felt the hand of God telling me, "I've got this. Every detail of your trip!" As I listened to Jane Willard tell stories about the colorful and amazing Holy Land, a sense of anticipation rushed over me.

The next day, I boarded a flight from LAX to Tel Aviv. Once in Israel, the tour was off and running. There was so much to see and so little time! Jaffa. Mount of Olives. Garden of Gethsemane. Bethlehem. The Sea of Galilee. St. Peter's Primacy. Valley of Elah. The Garden Tomb. Pool of Bethesda. Masada. En Gedi. The Garden Tomb. Jerusalem. These are places I had mostly nodded at and then passed over as I read my Bible. They were so far, far away. At last, I was there.

I floated in the Dead Sea; got baptized in the Jordan River; ate falafel, hummus and shawarma; walked the Via Dolorosa. I pictured myself meeting Jesus as I stood on the hillside where He fed the five-thousand. I picked up a stone from the brook where David had plucked his five to face Goliath. I marveled as I watched modern-day shepherds abide their flocks on a lush green hill—perhaps the same hill where David fought off a lion or a bear.

I sat on the southern steps where Jesus entered the temple, and I worshipped. I really worshipped! Tears flowed, and even though I couldn't explain what was happening, I felt a fresh understanding of Jesus' beloved Israel. I identified with Him. This was His land.

As I write these words, I am home in Reno. Every morning for many years, I have sat in what I call my Jesus chair and read my Bible. This morning I read a familiar passage, John 6:1: "Sometime after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him..." Ahhhhh! I was there again. It made more sense. The Bible story was not just a story. It came alive!

I was comforted to have Dallas' map with me while I was on my journey, and I am grateful that Jane gave it to me. I am also thankful for Lysa and Lisa—they are great teachers. But in the end, it wasn't the map or the tour leading that cracked the code of the Holy Land; rather, it was the sense of God's

presence and His touch on me at the sites where Jesus walked. That's what took me deeper. Now the places of the Bible have come more to life! There is no way to adequately describe this. Each of us has to let God crack the code for us. Maps and books point us in the right direction, but to get deeper, we must actually walk the path with Jesus.

My hope for you is that you don't wait until you are in your 50s (as I did) to start reading Dallas Willard's books, or just as importantly in your 60s (as I did) to go to the beloved land of Israel. Make plans now to do both. Your image of God will change from black and white to living color.

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