

How a Trip to the Holy Land Changed My Life

I traveled to Israel more than 20 years ago. But this month, my wife and I took a 13-day trip there with a group of American friends. I'd already seen the typical tourist sites in Jerusalem, and honestly, I was not looking forward to standing in long lines to see Jesus' tomb. (Sometimes the Holy Land can feel like a religious version of Disney World—especially on crowded days.)

A friend of mine from Puerto Rico says that once you visit the Holy Land, the Bible “goes from black and white to color.” That is exactly what happened to me—from the moment I watched a group of fishermen clean their nets on their boat on the Sea of Galilee. It feels like I got a new pair of glasses. When I read the Bible now, certain words jump off the page that I never noticed.

Our trip took us from Haifa in the northwest to the Dead Sea in the east. Not only did we tour some of the more popular destinations like Capernaum, Nazareth and the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, but we also stopped at Elijah's Cave in Haifa, Mount Gerizim in Samaria and Elisha's Spring in Jericho—the place where the prophet healed the poisonous waters. We even explored the ruins of Magdala, believed to be the birthplace of Mary Magdalene.

I came back from this trip wishing I could return—and hoping that my friends can make a similar pilgrimage. I guarantee a visit to the Holy Land is worth the investment, but I would recommend the following:

- 1. Make sure you have a skilled guide.** Tourism is a huge industry in Israel. In October of this year, Israel reported its largest number of tourists ever. That means there are some

people giving tours who may be doing it for the wrong reasons. I strongly recommend you arrange for a guide who is a committed Christian. Our guide grew up in the land and is a Spirit-filled believer. He knows the Bible, history and geography.

2. Read the gospels while you are there. Many scholars say the Holy Land is “the fifth gospel”—which means the land itself is a witness of Christ. I decided to read the Gospel of Matthew while I was there. Even though I have always believed the words of Scripture are true, they became even more inspired for me when I saw the hillside where Jesus fed the multitude, and I visited the ruins of the house where Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law.

3. Connect with the “living stones,” not just the old ruins. My trip to Israel was actually not just for tourism. We were able to connect with Christians in the land—on both sides of the current political conflict. One of my favorite moments was worshipping with both Israeli and Arab believers who have found common ground in their love for Jesus. Even though the church is small in the Holy Land, and struggling, God is moving powerfully among His people. If you go, do everything you can to encourage and strengthen the body of Christ while you are there.

4. Try to avoid the crowds. Our tour guide did a masterful job of taking us to places that are off the beaten path. We hiked near the Sea of Galilee and sat on rocks near where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. When we went to Bethlehem, we spent most of our time in Beit Sahour, “the place of the sleepless,” where the shepherds learned that Jesus had been born. Everyone visits the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, but when we went to Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, we almost had the place to ourselves. That’s the site where Peter prayed for a group of Gentiles to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

5. Don’t avoid the Palestinian areas. My favorite part of this

trip was visiting places that are considered off-limits by many tourists. Christian pilgrims often avoid the Palestinian areas because of fear or prejudice. But what they don't realize is that Arab Christians actually are a key to the spiritual awakening in this land.

For centuries, Palestinian believers have preserved the Christian sites in modern Israel—and many biblical sites are located in the Palestinian territories. These include Bethlehem; the ruins of Jericho; the Judean wilderness where Jesus was tempted; the site of Jesus' baptism; and the ancient city of Sychar, in modern Nablus—where the Samaritan woman talked with Jesus at Jacob's well. That place alone was worth the price of my trip!

I met some wonderful Palestinian believers during my visit. They love Jesus but they feel forgotten by American Christians. They also speak Arabic, which means they have a greater chance of sharing the gospel with Muslims than anyone else in Israel. They need our prayers, our love and our support. Don't ignore them when you visit their homeland.