

“Holy Land Pilgrimage” - Special Edition

Pieces in the Puzzle: God-given Experiences, Reflections & Insights on a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Luke 4:31-44

Rev. Ted Wood

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Ted: I want to teach you some Hebrew. The Hebrew word for *yes* is *ken*. Can you hear me?

Brave Men: *Ken*.

Ted: And the Hebrew word for *no* is *lo*. So on our tour to the Holy Land we had an Israeli guide, Hana. She insisted that we get that *ha* sound right at the beginning—Hannah, Hana. And she would teach us Hebrew every morning. So we came up with a little bit of a Hebrew vocabulary.

I'm very grateful for Kirk. I don't know if you've observed this, but he has really grown into this role. His presentation, his talks, his prayers have just really grown. And that's what any of us seek, don't we? We want to keep growing in what God has called us to do.

Well, let's pray. Lord God, we thank You that thousands of years ago You chose a small, insignificant family to be Your people, the apple of Your eye, that You would choose those people for no reason except out of Your good will and purposes and out of Your love. You chose them not only to have a land, but to multiply and to be a light of Your revelation to the whole world, to the Gentiles. And we thank You that by grace alone You have taken those of us who were not part of that original family and grafted us, made us part of that tree, so that we too may have a land and have a family and be a light ourselves. We pray every day for the peace of Jerusalem and also for the preservation and perfection and prosperity of Your people. We pray this in Your name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Ted: Last time I talked to you I talked to you about the humiliation of Christ, and how that fits into our own humiliation. It was a very sober presentation and I was hoping to continue it today. But because we got caught up in a lot of difficulty getting home from Israel I just got back right over the holidays, a ten-day trip—one day to get there, one day to get back, and eight days on the road. I said to Sig, “I don't know. I've got jet lag; I'm trying to catch up with my clients. I don't know if I can fill in for Jeff.”

And he said, “Why don't you talk about your trip to the Holy Land?”

So I want to do that. And I've selected a few things; there's just so much. Every day we started at 7:30 in the morning; we had to be on the bus. And we didn't finish until 4:30, 5:00, something like that. We were served at 6:30. We were asleep at 8:30 or 9:00 so we could survive into the next day. It was very intense the whole time.

And coming back we were on the Delta flight from Tel Aviv to JFK. And the flight was to leave at 11:45 that night. And by 2:15 in the morning we were sitting on the flight on the tarmac, and they canceled the flight. And they proceeded to try to find Delta and they proceeded to try to find us a place. They got us a place at the Tel Aviv Hilton, which is actually a 35-minute drive away from the airport. They gave us a slip of paper and they

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said, “Here, call Delta Agent and book your seats.” Which is fine, except that the card had the Israeli number on it. And my phone was set up to call the U.S. numbers. So I would have had to make a long-distance call from Tel Aviv to Tel Aviv to get there. And at 4:00 in the morning my mind was an absolute mush.

So I said, “Well what I will do is I will call up the El Al, the Israeli airlines, the El Al office in the States, because that will be a local number from Tel Aviv. *(Laughter)* Are you following me? *(Laughter)*

So I called them up. And the recorded message says to me, “We’re not open now.” *(Laughter)* “But we are transferring you to our main office,” at which point all the instructions came to me in Hebrew. *(Laughter)* So at that point it was almost 5:00 in the morning. I said, “Lord, I cannot fight this anymore with the phone. I’m going to have to trust You, Lord, to get me a seat.” And He did, and I’m here now. But all that is just to simply say that I beg your indulgence for not talking about a more Biblical subject, I guess—digging into the Scripture but talking about this trip—“*God-Given Experiences, Reflections and Insights Through the Pilgrimage to the Holy Land.*”

Introduction: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Everyone should go do this trip, everyone. It will change and challenge and stretch your mind in ways you’ll never guess. There are just a couple things to know when you go over there.

Israel is not the United States. And when you go to Israel you need to realize that you’re in a Jewish state.

Now this is no reflection on anything or any commentary. But for the first time in my life, when I was in the state of Israel versus the Palestinian authority, which is not but about five or six miles from the border, not but about five or six miles from Jerusalem, all the time that I was in the state of Israel I was surrounded by Jews. It was pretty much all Jews. And it’s just a different experience.

It would be kind of like if you went to South Africa and were surrounded by people of dark skin. And it’s just different. So that’s the first thing.

The second thing is that at this time of year Israel is very green in the north. And the further south you get it gets browner and more sandstone-looking. So you can actually tell that the landscape changes fairly rapidly, because remember, the country is 40 miles wide by 200 miles long. And the bottom 100 miles is all desert in the Negev. So it’s really 40 miles by 100 miles.

Israel is a very small country. You can put 473 Israel’s into the United States; that’s how small it is. It’s about the size of New Jersey, which is not a very happy comparison. *(Laughter)* When you land at Ben Gurion Airport outside of Tel Aviv you’re about an hour-and-a-half drive from the Sea of Galilee; that’s how close. And once you’re in Galilee, you’re probably pretty much within a 30- to 45-minute drive to everything.

There is a triangle that goes on the Sea of Galilee in the north from Tiberius to Caesarea to Chorazin. It’s a triangle, and scholars have figured out that 80% of what happens in the Bible happens in that triangle. We think that a lot of it is happening in Jerusalem.

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One of Israel’s top four industries, outside of research and development—interestingly enough an industry,—and agriculture is tourism. Tourism is a huge industry and it dominates everything. And there are a number of places. I’ve developed this saying in my mind, *Line up to be fleeced! (Laughter)* Everything is set up to take advantage of the tourist to the max, to the point that we went into one shop that was an approved shop, because they said that with some of these other shops you give them their credit card and they may put some extra zeroes at the end of your purchase. And you get back to the States and you’ve got to sort that out with Visa or MasterCard.

But in one shop there was a small bronze cross, a Byzantine cross, maybe a thousand years old, maybe 1200 years old, during the Byzantine period. I bought that same cross for my wife at Henne Jewelers several years ago. And when I bought it it was in a sterling silver setting. That cross with a sterling silver setting at Henne Jewelers in Shadyside was \$400. That same cross in the shop I went to was \$1600. At one of the merchants they had olive wood crèches—beautiful, but not extraordinary. The price they quoted from one of the people on our trip for that crèche was \$11,000. The price was negotiated down to \$3500.

So you can get great buys. But there are places that are set up to really take your money from you, which is disconcerting because that’s not the way we do business in this country. *(Laughter)* Not at that level. *(Laughter)*

And the final thing I would say as an introduction is that you just need to know that when you’re in the Holy Land, every place your footsteps you’re stepping on ancient civilizations. We went to Bethsaida in the north, just south of the Sea of Galilee. And there was a Roman city there that they’ve uncovered. It was unbelievable, a Roman form. It was just as if you went to Italy and saw it. That’s what the Romans did in every place. They had a blueprint for the city. Every city looked like this.

But in back of the city was a town, which is a mound that many layers of civilization had been on, all the way down to the Middle Bronze Age which means Canaanite, early Canaanite stuff. Now we walked to the top of that hill, and as I walked on the side I could see a dark black line that went right through the soil. Do you know what that line was? It was kind of like a line of soil about that thick.

Brave Man: Volcanoes?

Ted: No, not volcanoes.

Brave Man: Fire.

Ted: Fire? What kind of fire?

Brave Man: In Jerusalem?

Ted: Not Jerusalem. I’m in Bethsaida. It was a burlow. That means that was the city, maybe in 1000 B.C. And that’s what was left of it.

So every place you step, if you go down a few feet, or even a foot or less, you’re already hitting history that’s a thousand, two, three, four thousand years old—every place you go. And in Israel there’s no construction that goes on, no development. They call in the archaeologists. They have to do a survey. And sometimes whole major projects are stopped because they find something they didn’t find before.

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So that’s kind of the introduction. I mean, there are so many things I could say about it, but that’s the introduction. Do you all have any questions or thoughts at this point?

Our guide was Hana. Getting the right guide is critical. It was our pastor’s fourth or fifth trip over there, and each time he had Hana to be the guide. She’s an Israeli. We met her one son; he’s an archaeologist of one of the sites we visited. She speaks excellent English. She doesn’t speak any Arabic. Our driver was Palestinian and she couldn’t speak to him except in Hebrew.

But I’m telling you, Hana knew the Bible, New Testament and Old Testament, backwards and forwards. She tied in all kinds of Old Testament prophecies, Scriptures, locations, events, right into the New Testament. She spoke as if she were a believer. She was a very professional person; I respected her very much. She was kind of under five feet tall, but a force to be reckoned with.

I tried to ask her some personal questions, but she always put them aside. I asked her a question once and she said, “Why do you want to know that?” She was very abrupt, so I didn’t venture beyond that.

But Hana got to Israel in this way. Her mother, when she was a young teenager and living in Poland, went to her mother, Hana’s grandmother, and said, “Mom, I really want to go to Israel. I want to emigrate.”

Now this was before Israel became a country. It was part of the British mandate. The British were controlling that part of the world at that time.

And here mom says, “No. I can’t afford to send you. You should stay here with your family; this is your place. Don’t go to Israel. I can’t give you a blessing to go to Israel.”

Hana’s mother disobeyed her mom and went and settled in Israel in the late 1930s. Hana had eight brothers and sisters. Not one of them survived the Holocaust. You think about that.

Again and again you read these stories of Jews that were in Eastern Europe in Germany and how they said, “No, this is just another experience of the pogroms, of the persecution we have received over thousands of years. This will blow over. The Nazis won’t really do what they’re saying they’re going to do.” But they did.

Hana’s father, on the other hand, is an even more interesting story because he was from Hungary. And in the 18th century, the 1700s, he went to his rabbi and his rabbi said to him, “I want you to immigrate to Hebron. I want you to go live in Hebron.” And so her father’s people had been there for 200-and-some years.

Now remember, this was part of the Ottoman Empire; there was no country of Israel. But what I found is that wave after wave of Jews—“Al Mia,” as it’s called—the Movement—four, five, six, seven Al Mias—movements of Jews, maybe 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 thousand at a time, that made their way into the nation of Israel.

#3, the third point, if you’re following along in the outline. *Is this where Jesus walked?* I remember this experience. I studied in Israel in ’71 and ’72. And when we went to one of the sites, (I think it was Caesarea on the Sea of Galilee), there were three busloads, great big tour busloads of folks, Americans who pulled up to Caesarea, and they all disgorged at the same time. I mean, when you’re there and on a tour you just have to understand that I’m a tourist nerd, that’s what I am. I’ve got my name tag around

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my neck. It says, “The Tour Group.” And I’ve got my ear bud in my ear and the transmitter in my pocket, and I’m following the tour guide. That’s just the way it is. I’d never done this before. We usually go on our own way. But I’ve never done that kind of tour.

So these three buses disgorged. And they were from some place down South. You can’t imagine how many Southerners there are touring Israel. And it said on the side of the bus that they were from Bethel Bible Baptist Church. And they disgorged from the bus. And the first thing I heard was one of the people on the tour speaking to the guide who was there. She said, “Is this where Jesus walked?”

And the guide said, “Oh yes, Jesus walked here.” You know, it’s all kind of made up; it’s a fantasy world.” But everybody said, “Did Jesus walk here? Was Jesus walking here?”

And that’s very hard to find for a number of reasons. But I’m going to share with you some of the places where Jesus probably did walk in those very places.

In terms of the holy sites like The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and The Church of the Holy Sepulcher which is the tomb in Jerusalem, what you thought you’re going to see is not what you’re going to see. Tourism in Israel started in 326 A.D. *(Laughter)* And that is when Emperor Constantine who had just won a series of battles and taken control of the Roman Empire himself, fighting amongst his other generals and other politicians, he took control. And at that point he also made Christianity legal. Help me out, somebody. I think it was 321 A.D., something like that. He made it legal because his mother Helena was a Christian. And he was in time converted, however you want to judge that historically. He was converted and baptized as a result of the witness of his mom Helena.

But Helena had an obsession. She wanted to get to the Holy Land and be able to designate and build churches on all the places where Jesus was, where Jesus walked. And she did that. And three of the great churches in Israel, in Jerusalem, are there because Helena built them between 326 and 328. She built The Church of the Nativity. She built The Church of the Holy Sepulcher. And she built The Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives.

So that is the beginning of the process. So what you’re going to see is that you’re going to see late Roman Byzantine churches and sites. If you go to The Church of the Nativity where tradition says Jesus was born, you can’t even imagine a manger. It’s got a whole church. You go down underneath the altar; they’ve got an altar. It’s not Greek. It’s an Armenian Orthodox church. You go underneath the altar. There’s a cave down there, beautifully decorated. And there’s a hole in the ground with a huge silver star around that hole. And you can reach down and touch the stone where supposedly Jesus was birthed.

So for our eyes, for our Protestant eyes, this is just way over the top; it’s just way too much. But nonetheless that’s what you should expect when you go there, except that in Galilee and the North it’s much more primitive and I really like it a lot. And that’s where I’m going to go next, to where Jesus actually walked. And I’m going to read, and you can follow along, from Luke 4:31-44. And I’m not covering all the verses; I’m just skipping around.

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“Jesus went down to Capernaum.” And Capernaum is on the Sea of Galilee to the North. The Sea of Galilee in the north, forty miles of the Jordan River, the Dead Sea in the South. So He was up in the north, where most of His activity took place.

“Jesus went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee. And He was teaching them on the Sabbath. And they were astounded at His teaching, for His word possessed authority.”

Now where was Jesus teaching? He was teaching in Capernaum. Where was the location of His teaching?

Brave Men: The synagogue.

Ted: The synagogue, right, in the synagogue of Capernaum which exists. And they’ve uncovered it. Sadly, the synagogue was built about 300-and-something A.D. So it comes three hundred years after Jesus was there. But happily it’s built on the foundation of the synagogue when Jesus was there. So although you get an idea of what the synagogue looked like, you can see the foundation stones of the actual synagogue itself if you look carefully.

“Jesus arose and left the synagogue.” I’m moving on. *“And entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever. And they appealed to Him on their behalf. And He stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she arose and began to serve them.”*

Moving on. *“And when it was day, He departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought Him and came to Him, and would have kept Him from leaving them. But He said to them, ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose.’ And He was preaching in the synagogues of Galilee.”*

So when Jesus went out doing all this preaching He was in Capernaum. We know He was in Capernaum. And we also know that He was in Peter’s mother-in-law’s house.

Now there has been a very fascinating discovery made. If you go to the front of the synagogue, the opening at the front door of it, across the street is now a church. The church is elevated on stilts because it sits over an archaeological dig, because as they begin to dig out of the front door of the synagogue and move across the street into the next neighborhood, what they found is that they found a house, the foundation of a house that was significantly altered in the first century, as if to accommodate a place of worship. And in time when the Byzantines came along, when the late Romans came along, they built a church right over the top of this house. Scholars and archaeologist now believe that this was Peter’s mother-in-law’s house that you actually can see today.

That’s fairly well-confirmed. It doesn’t say it on the front door. You know, you don’t go to the front door, ring the bell and Peter may be in. *(Laughter)* So the proximity of that—preaching in the synagogue, the walk out of the synagogue, “my mother-in-law has a fever; would you come across the street?” And they did. And they’ve been able to find this house, which is probably a place where Jesus was, in all likelihood.

Also at that synagogue, a fourth-century synagogue, there are pillars that they’ve reconstructed; they’d all fallen down. And they’re capitals. Do you know what a capital is? You’ve got a pillar and you’ve got the top of the pillar. That’s called a capital. And on those capitals are some very interesting carvings.

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On one of those capitals there is in the middle of it a menorah, which had been for most of history the symbol of Judaism. I’ve heard that the Star of David is a relatively new symbol for Judaism. This had been the symbol for Judaism. On that capital is the menorah. On one side is the shovel of incense. Did you even know that was a piece of equipment that they used in the temple? When they had incense they had to shovel it and then put it into the converter. So there’s the menorah, the shovel of incense and the *shofar*, which is what? You know what the *shofar* is.

Brave Man: The horn.

Ted: The ram’s horn, yes, to announce the high holy days. Now on that capital which was part of a 4th-century A.D. synagogue, what are those symbols doing there? Is it just illustration, or is it just decoration? Is there a meaning to all of that? Why would all those symbols be on that capital—the menorah, the shovel of incense, and the *shofar*? What did those things have to do with? Did they have anything to do with the synagogue?

Think about it. Were those things used in the synagogue? Maybe the *shofar* was, but certainly not the shovel of incense, and probably not the menorah. Where were those instruments used?

Brave Man: In the temple.

Ted: In the temple. Where was the temple?

Brave Man: In Jerusalem.

Ted: But where was it in the 4th century A.D.?

Brave Man: In Shiloh.

Ted: No, no.

Brave Man: No?

Ted: Where was the temple?

Brave Man: It wasn’t.

Ted: It wasn’t. It had been flattened by the Romans in 130 A.D., when the Romans finally got tired of these troublesome Jews. And they flattened the temple completely. And they took the name of Jerusalem away and they renamed it Alia Capitalina. They gave it a Roman god’s name to get rid of it. And they started calling that place no longer Judah or Judea. They started calling it Palestine, because Palestine refers to what? What people does it refer to? It doesn’t refer to the Jews. Who lived there?

Brave Man: The Philistines.

Ted: Philistines. So the Romans got rid of Jerusalem, flattened it out, built a Roman city on top of it, got rid of the temple, and they gave it a new name. And they gave the Jews a new name. And they called them Palestinians to mock them, to show them that the Philistines had the final say, didn’t they. We’ve gotten rid of you guys. Your enemies, the Philistines.

So that capital there remembers the temple. Look, here’s the temple. This is what was in our temple when we had it at one time.

That was the capital. On a door lift in the capital, there’s a very interesting picture if you can imagine it. It’s like a little house; it’s like a little Roman house on wheels. That’s a silly little image. It’s like a Roman building, if you can think in your mind what a

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Roman building might look like with the roof and the pediment and the columns. And it’s all on wheels.

Well, that can mean two things. It could refer to the ark of the covenant. And basically that little building was like a box, an ornate box. And the ark of the covenant was on wheels.

But do you remember how the ark of the covenant was carried around? How was it carried around?

Don Nemit: By poles.

Ted: By poles. It wasn’t carried around by wheels. So either that’s the ark of the covenant, or that’s an image and representation of the temple as a Roman would think of it.

Now what would the wheels on the ark of the covenant or the wheels on the temple represent? What message would that be giving to the Jews who went to that synagogue?

Brave Man: Ezekiel.

Ted: Ezekiel. That helps, doesn’t it? Ezekiel, right? His image. I think that what the scholars have tended to think that what it represents is that the temple may be destroyed, but it’s always with you. It goes on wheels. It’s like a transportable temple. It comes here. It comes to this synagogue when Jews get together and they pray and they remember Jerusalem and they do righteous deeds. That is the remembrance of the temple. And it’s like a temple on wheels, or an ark of the covenant on wheels; it’s where we are. Wherever we are we can take the temple with us.

Now one other place we went to was a site that I think is only mentioned briefly in the Bible. In fact, follow with me. This is young Jesus, a *technon* in Zephyrus. Zephyrus is a city just south of the Sea of Galilee, southwest. But it’s only four miles from Nazareth.

Now look at what the Scripture says. Luke 2:39-40: “*When they*” (that is, Joseph and Mary) “*When they had performed everything according to the law of the LORD, they returned to Galilee with Jesus, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him.*” So Jesus ends up in Nazareth.

And then Mark 6:3—I’ll just read it to you. They said this about Jesus. “*Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon? Aren’t His sisters with us as well? And they took offense at Him.*” That’s in His own home town.

Now there are three or four passages that reference Jesus as being a carpenter. “*Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary?*” The Greek word that’s used there is the word *technon*. It’s most often translated “carpenter.”

But what does that word sound like in English? We have a similar kind of related word *Technon* would be—

Bishop Rodgers: Technology.

Ted: Technology. So a *technon* could also not only be a carpenter, he could be an artisan, a skilled worker. Now what we know is that Nazareth at the time of Jesus was a very small community, just a total closed roads backwater. But four miles down the road we stood there in the city of Zephyrus. We could say, “Look! Right over that hill is Nazareth!”

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Here we are in Zephyrus. And in Zephyrus one of the Herod's was having a huge building project, turning the whole city into a massive Roman city. Tens of thousands of people were living there.

Joseph was a carpenter. Jesus was a carpenter or a *technon*. He was in Nazareth. What kind of work could He get in Nazareth? Just based on the population and the demographics there's almost no work there. “But, Son, if You go over the hill four miles,” (which is a decent walk in the morning), “You can probably find work in the massive building project that Herod is doing in that city.”

So to walk around Zephyrus and to see the stones and to see the stones where Jesus as a carpenter, a *technon* or an artisan might have worked. Maybe He didn't carve the stone, but maybe He created the framework, the wooden framework for the Roman arches. And then they would put a frame in and then they would put in the arch. That's how they created an arch.

It was strange. I felt very close to Jesus coming over that hill in the town and saying, “Is there any work for a carpenter? Do you have a job for me, somebody?”

“Oh, yeah. They're working on the forum over there. You can probably get some work over there.” And he's spending his days there. And that would have presented a lot of employment for Him.

To get to the Sea of Galilee, other places were The Valley of the Doves and The Valley of the Winds at Magdala. That's a very narrow valley. To get from Nazareth up into the Sea of Galilee you have to go like this. And it's about a 40-mile journey. But everyone who wanted to get from the central part of Israel, like Nazareth, and get to the Galilee area, you had to go this way. It was a very narrow valley. It's still there. No doubt that's the route Jesus took into the Sea of Galilee every time He took it. I felt very close to Him at that point.

And I also felt very close to Him at a recent excavation at a place called Magdala. Now you know Mary Magdalene. It was Mary of the village of Magdala. And Magdala was a fishing village. It sits right on the Sea of Galilee. And in 2009 the orb of that site, which at that point was called Hawaii Beach, *laughter*), kind of a low-level resort for Israelis who wanted to get out of Jerusalem. They would go up to Galilee and they would go and vacation on little cottages on Hawaii Beach.

That property got sold, and in 2009 the developer who decided that he was going to develop this new lodge and new resort area, of course had to have the archaeologists dig first. Now archaeologists at that point had already determined where they thought Magdala was—the old Biblical village of Magdala.

But they were wrong; it wasn't there. They went one foot down and immediately they hit the old city. I'm quite convinced that it was one of the cities that Jesus spent time in. And as they dug down they found a synagogue right underneath there, within one foot.

And then in the synagogue, a good-sized synagogue—30 yards by 30 yards—within that space they found a stone called The Magdala Stone. And that stone is about a foot-and-a-half by 2 feet by 2 feet. And the carving all around that stone illustrates the temple. It shows the menorah in the middle. On one side are the stone carvings, on the other side the menorah, and on either side the bases holding the oil that kept the lamp burning.

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On the two sides there is what appears to be a three-dimensional look into the temple—arcade after arcade—the porticoes where some of the healings took place looking into the temple. And on the back side of that stone there is an arch and an opening that shows a flame—the Holy of Holies. All this is represented on this stone called The Magdala Stone.

Their best guess is that they think that the purpose of this stone was to be what’s called in Hebrew a *bema*. And a *bema* is where you laid the Torah scroll when you read it.

Now this Capernaum synagogue is 4th-century, 300-and-something, 200- to 300 years after Jesus. But the synagogue at Magdala is different, because in 66 A.D. the Jews revolted against the Romans. And during that revolt Magdala was involved in the opposition. And the Romans sent their army and massacred the citizens and burned the city to the ground and leveled it. So everything pre-66 A.D. was saved. There was no new building on top of it. They called it the Israel Pompeii. It was all frozen in time. And that stone in all probability was a stone that Jesus probably read the Torah from and taught from on that stone.

That gave me goose bumps when I saw that, because that was original to the period of Jesus. And we know it because no construction went on after that.

Brave Man: Did she point that all out to you, Ted?

Ted: Yes, in every detail.

Brave Man: That’s why it’s so important that the person who is guiding you around has this wealth of information.

Ted: She knew it. And she knew it backwards and forwards. She quoted the archaeologists. The best tour guides in Israel have to be certified.

Don: It’s a profession.

Ted: It’s a profession.

Brave Man: You haven’t talked about the Jordan River. I’m sure you’re going to get to that.

Ted: Well, I’m going to get to the Jordan River. And I’m going to get to a baptism experience. I see people starting to yawn, so we’ll move right along.

The next point that I wanted to make is *how beautiful is the body of Christ*. You know that song by Twyla Paris. *Ted sings*

“How beautiful! How beautiful

Is the body of Christ!”

So that’s just to say that every place we went in the Holy Land, every site, our group sang. And in some of those chapels and those ancient churches the acoustics are tremendous. They had 27 in our group. And at the Garden Tomb, perhaps at one of the sites where Jesus was buried (I don’t think He was buried there), but nonetheless we sang, “Spirit of the living God.” We also sang, “Jesus Christ is risen today.” We also sang, “Because He lives I can face tomorrow.”

And then when we went to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, that small little chamber underneath the altar, supposedly the site of Jesus’ birth, we sang:

“Away in a manger, no crib for a bed.”

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And then what? Half a mile down the road we went up to the Shepherd’s Field. What do you think we sang there, at the Shepherd’s Field where the angels appeared?

Brave Man: “O, Holy Night?”

Ted: Not “O, Holy Night!”

Brave Man: “Hark! The Herald—“

Ted (*singing*) “**Hark! The herald angels sing.” We also sang “Joy to the World.”**

Then we got to the Mount of Beatitudes, which is where the Sermon on the Mount was given in Galilee in the North. We sang:

“Jesus, name above all names,

Beautiful Savior, glorious Lord!”

We also sang the Old 100th: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

But perhaps the most moving experience of singing was that there were pilgrims from every country there. And we heard Spanish being sung at these sites. And we heard lots of Italians there, and they were singing their songs. We heard Polish being sung, and we heard German being sung. But the most beautiful piece I heard was the one in the chapels. There was a group of French pilgrims. And they were singing a song that was almost medieval and it was like that it took you to another place.

These are not songs we know. But they were singing praises to God. And it was the thought that people from all over the earth were coming together as the body of Christ.

#5. We had a chance to have dinner with some Christians from Bethlehem. They drove us into Bethlehem. Of course we had to get our Israeli guide who had to depart. They put a Palestinian guide on the bus because now we’re in another country. So they took us on the bus and they took us into Bethlehem which is like this, and like this. And they took us down the narrow roads. And all of a sudden our bus turns off on a dark unlit road. And then they pull into a third parking lot with a bunch of men leaning up against cars like this. And I said, “Oh no, what’s happening?” (*Laughter*)

What it was is that this was a Catholic fellow. He was Palestinian. He arranged for people to have dinner in different houses—four of us here, five of us here, whatever. So we went and had dinner with him. We had dinner with his family. And the name of the Palestinian, the Arab, the head of our group who was actually the host, his name was George. He was in his early 20s.

It was interesting. He told a story. He said that he had just gotten married about three months prior. I said, “How did you meet your wife?”

He said, “Well, I met her when she was 13. But I waited till she was 16.” (*Laughter*)

And I said, “You know, in our country you could get arrested for that.”

And he said, “In my country too.” (*Laughter*) But the meal was excellent.

But the thing that struck me was this. Okay, George was a Catholic, a Roman Catholic. He went to St. Fatima’s Church in Bethlehem. Another family got hosted by a Greek Orthodox family. They were all Palestinians. They were all of Arabian background.

Now it’s not like it is in this country where we say, “Well, I’m going to start off as an Episcopalian and maybe in four years I’m going to be a Methodist and then I’m going to become something else.” They don’t do that. The line stays constant.

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How did George’s family become Catholic? I asked him. “How did that happen?”

He said, “Probably when the Crusaders came in.” That’s 800 years ago. And then prior to that they were probably Orthodox. How did they become Orthodox? Did they start off as Baptists in the morning and say, “Well, I think we’re going to go to the Orthodox Church this Sunday?”

No. How did those people who live in Bethlehem, those Christians, where did they trace their roots? How deep do they grow? Do you know?

Brave Man: Helena.

Ted: Keep going. Back earlier than Helena. His descendants, George’s descendants or his ancestors had probably talked to the apostles, or the associates of the apostles. You think about that, because the roots of early Christianity go back to the first century. That blew me away, to think that that family had been Christian for two thousand years and coming out of that one root. And then if you traced it back, if you had a birds-eye view of history and if you can look back, George’s ancestor is talking to John the apostle, or one of John’s teachers or associates. So that was mind-blowing.

Okay, the last thing I’m going to talk about. As I said, two baptisms in the Jordan River. The Jordan River is very narrow. Everybody tells you that. At our point there was a baptismal section, a baptismal station. And the Israelis have done a great job. There are ramps with handrails to go down, paved ramps right into the water. It’s wide; it’s probably at its widest twenty yards. That’s as wide as it gets.

Probably no baptisms happen there, but it’s wide, so it can accompany them. And there were mobs of pilgrims and visitors coming in groups and getting in. And you could go into that section or that section, or Section 3 or Section 4. And if you wanted to they would sell you some water from the Jordan River. And if you wanted them to they would sell you a bottle of Jordan River water with Jordan River stones in it, or they’d sell you a bottle with Jordan River water, stones and some holy oil. I mean, it was like the temple with the money changers. *(Laughter)*

But that was on one side. And you walked down these ramps in the water, in groups. And the group next to us was a great big independent church. Probably 60 people got baptized. Baptized before or not, they didn’t care. They were just baptizing everybody. You rent the gowns, you rent the towels. And you’ve got locker rooms, and you go in.

And I was struck by this other group that was next to us. It was a party scene. “Oh, I hope my pastor doesn’t hold me down too long! Ha, ha, ha, ha!” *(Laughter)* Selfies! It was that whole atmosphere. And the thing I was struck by is “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him in baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*”

The thing that struck me is that in most of the world, if you get baptized, you’re a dead person. You’re a marked person. There were more reports I got the other day of the number of Christians in northern Nigeria that are killed by Muslim terrorists—women and children, dozens and dozens. That’s what it means to be baptized.

Do you remember that scene when the Egyptian Coptics and the Egyptian Christian orders were captured by ISIS and taken down in the water and had their throats slit? Do

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you know how they identified those fellows? When Coptic Christians get baptized, they have a cross tattooed on their wrists. “So which amongst you Egyptians are the Christians? Oh, that’s easy enough; everybody pull up your wrists.” That’s what it means. It’s not like, “Hey, look at me! Selfie!”

So we brought our group down. And of course I go to a Presbyterian church now, and our pastor does not believe in re-baptisms. God bless him. *(Laughter)* And we went through our group, and so there were 27. There were about twelve of them who reaffirmed their baptismal covenant, reaffirmed their baptismal vows as they were going under. So 12 of our group of 27 went through.

Then another group came right behind us, about five people. All of them were dark-skinned people. But I knew they didn’t quite fit together. I just had a sense, you know, that this group belonged to this group. And they started to get in line right behind our group. And of course Hana is very protective. She said, “No, no! This is a separate group. Our group, our tour, that’s a separate tour. I’m sorry, we can’t take you.”

So she looks down at Pastor Dirk. And the pastor says, “No, come on, bring them in.” Well, it turns out that those five all showed up, and they didn’t know why they were going to get baptized. They just showed up. They were not part of a tour, they were not part of a group. They didn’t have any person to baptize them. They just showed up, anticipating that this could be done for them.

The first person to be baptized was someone to whom Pastor Dirk says, “Have you ever been baptized before?” And then if they have, he says, “Okay, this will be a reaffirmation.”

And the first person who got in line, his name was Joe. He was from Kenya. The next three that came in were from an independent church, a black church in Philadelphia. Kenya and Philadelphia.

Dirk said to one of the guys, “Have you ever been baptized previously?”

He says, “Yes, but it was a Roman Catholic baptism,” which I thought was funny. *(Laughter)* Just because it’s in the name of the holy Trinity, I was to dismiss that.

And then the fifth person came down. He said, “Have you been baptized?” And she said, “No.” It turned out that she was English; she was a Brit. But she was from India, a very dark-skinned Indian.

And he said to her, as he said to everyone, “Have you put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” And if they said, “Yes,” they were baptized. This was Chandra. Chandra was there because she felt that she needed to be where Jesus was. Chandra was raised in the Indian family.

She told us her story. She’s wet after the baptism; she’s got a towel around her. She’s shivering because it’s not warm. She tells us her story, and we’ve been corresponding with her; we’re finding out more.

She was raised in an Indian family in Great Britain near Birmingham in England. And her family was Hindu. And in her house they had a shrine, which often happens in Hindu houses, with pictures of all the different gods and gurus, and this kind of thing. And one of those pictures tacked up on the wall with all the other Hindu gods was Jesus, a picture of Jesus. He was one of the many gods, you know?

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And she couldn't quite figure it out. “What's He doing there? He's not an Indian.” And Chandra never got an answer for that. But she got married and she had a child, and then she said that her husband left her. And she went into deep depression. And she was sad and felt deserted, and felt that she did not have a friend in the world. And she said, “I felt so alone and sad. It just laid on me; I couldn't get rid of it.”

And one day when she was in that frame of mind, she heard a book drop from her shelf. She's a single mom with a child. Now I might tear up, but this is just so powerful. You know, I'm an Anglican; these things don't normally happen. (*Laughter*) I'm just joking. But she hears a book. She goes and finds it. It's a Bible.

They have an interesting educational system. A large portion of the schools are Church of England schools, even though they function kind of like a public school. And when she was a student, the Gideons came in and handed every student a Bible. And she had probably taken it as a good luck piece, put it on the shelf and had it for years. She said that was the purpose.

But it fell off. She doesn't know how it fell off. That book fell off and opened up. And she saw the words “*Follow Me.*”

Shortly thereafter she was in the marketplace and there was a Christian group singing. And the words of their song were “Follow Me.” And she knew she had to get to be with Jesus. And at that point she became a Christian.

She doesn't hardly know anything. And she showed up and she said, “I just knew I had to come to the Jordan and get baptized, because this is where Jesus did it.” I mean, she didn't think about going to the local church to get baptized. She thought she had to go to the Jordan to get baptized.

And so she went there and got baptized. And Pastor Dirk said to her, “Remember, as the water covers you, Chandra, the love of God in Jesus covers you so that nothing will ever separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

See, that's where she was hurting so badly. She felt that no one loved her. And as a result, she'd become a Christian! And we hugged each other like brothers and sisters, although she knows practically nothing!

And she wrote back and she says, “I can't believe I was there, and you were there to do my baptism. And you're an American!” (*Laughter*) So Chandra at that moment, even though that process, moved from death to life, darkness to light, alienation to love, being part of the family, knowing she was no longer alone. And she promised us in her most recent email that she was going to tell us her full story.

So you know what? If you just go out and do it, there are going to be opportunities for things like that to happen. I had an extensive conversation with an Orthodox Jewish girl as we waited for the flight to be canceled. Our pastor had a five-hour discussion with an Orthodox Jew who works in London and lives in Israel and flies every weekend. Both of those folks knew nothing. They were very devoted to the law. But they knew nothing about Christianity!

I talked about Paul. There was nothing; they knew nothing. The Orthodox Jewish businessman thought that Christianity didn't start until 300-and-something A.D. when Constantine and Helena came along.

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We’re way over time. I appreciate your patience.

Brave Man: I just want to say that you did a wonderful job in sharing that with us. For you it’s all transformational. Is there one spot or one situation or one location when you went there that—

Ted: I have the mango story.

Brave Man: For me it’s when you first got to Jerusalem and you looked down. And I thought of the Scripture where Jesus wept.

Ted: Yes, that’s a spectacular thing.

Brave Man: That just broke me down there. But I was wondering if you have one special spot. What you shared with us was overwhelming. I just wondered if you wanted to share one specific spot.

Ted: Yes. It was at Magdala. To think that Jesus was there, that there was that stone, that He took the scroll and He laid it on that stone and rolled it out, and followed along and read it, and we’re talking about it now. Go in peace, guys!

Brave Men: Amen. (*Applause*)