

“Floating Alive in the Dead Sea and Other Holy
Land Adventures”
by: Sarah Greeson

46



Tomorrow, the end of summer will catch me. It is dreadful to have the end of all things warm and leisurely come to a halt, yet it has happened sixteen times since I have known summertime's goodness. My merciless brain wants to dwell on all that I failed to accomplish in these last three months: the books I didn't read, the Russian I didn't learn, the thesis for which I didn't brainstorm, the clarinet I didn't practice. But, God did accomplish a few good things in me during this break from school. He sent me to the Holy Land for fourteen days, where I stood on grounds that I have read about my entire life. I will never be the same, and not in the cliché way. It was adventurous, it was overwhelming, it was healing. I hope never to forget the prints it has left on my soul.

My expectations were blown out of the water from the moment I set foot in—not *on*, like Peter, unfortunately—the Sea of Galilee. Though we discussed our destinations and the highlights of Jesus' ministry in the one hour spring seminar leading up to the Biblical Studies trip, I had little clue as to how this journey would impact me. My prayer in coming was that God might help me soak up the moments and listen for how He wants to make them a part of my life's story. My last few months were marked by deep heartache, and I knew this would be an auspicious opportunity to experience God's healing in a different way. Of course, He did not fail.

Contrary to the worries of friends and family who watch the news like hawks, I felt safe the entire time I was in Israel and Jordan. Sure, it is hard to ignore the giant grey walls built between Israeli and Palestinian territory, and there was an uncomfortable tension during our visit to Bethlehem, but there was no "close call." Instead, tour guides, bus drivers, waitresses, and tourists from all around the globe greeted me with smiles not unlike those in the local Walmart. One of the sweetest moments came when I was in a restroom at Jerash. An Arab woman looked at me, made a wiping gesture around her face and said something that sounded to me like "Bebe." The woman beside her translated for me: "Beautiful." Talk about a day-maker.

Perhaps the one thing I absolutely have not been able to shake is a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ's life on earth: it was more humble than I have ever before considered. I started reading through the gospels when summer break began, and in my reading God began to teach me new aspects of Jesus's life. When I stood on Mt. Precipice look-

ing onto Nazareth or partook in the Lord's Supper at the Garden Tomb or walked along Jerusalem's Via Dolorosa, which retraces the path of Jesus from Pilate's prison house to the cross, I was compelled to consider Christ's life. It became clear that he did not live comfortably, popularly, or as his mind's central concern (even though he *was* God). No, these aren't groundbreaking thoughts but, for me, it is finally beginning to penetrate. And the more I read, the more I see that following Him means being like him.

I left the Holy Land hungrier to read and know God's Word better than any movie script or lines of poetry. I love reading the Book so much more today than I did on, say, June fourth. I read while sitting on a rock next to the Sea of Galilee. During one of those times, I wrote, "This morning I sit not far from our hotel on a big, beautiful rock almost touching the Sea of Galilee. The sun is warming my back, the water hits the rocks, and hundreds of white birds tweet gathered in the distance...It all points to You. Your goodness, Your beauty, in Your chosen land."

Floating in the Dead Sea, venturing through Hezekiah's tunnel, trekking through Petra for a grand total of nine or so miles, bartering in the Old City, even eating a chocolate-hazelnut-filled croissant (Oh, to have one of those again...)—I cannot succinctly describe all of the emotions and thoughts that come to me when I remember these moments. The times we spent on mountain tops—Mount Precipice, Mount Carmel, Mount of Olives, and the view at Petra—always left me marveling at God as Creator. The sweeping beauty of these places is indelibly stamped in my mind. As our group stood on top of Mount Carmel and Dr. Carter read from 1 Kings about Elijah battling the prophets of Baal and God's sovereignty being made known in that very place, tears stung my eyes. When I sat on Mount Precipice listening to Dr. Jackson talk about Jesus' childhood home and looking out onto miles of pastoral land, my Father drew me nearer. When I had a clear glimpse into the Judean desert from Mount Nebo and thought about the long and car-sick inducing bus ride up and pondered how I would be able to walk through that desert for even a day (much less for forty years), the Spirit humbled me.

Even sights like the sun and the moon popped an involuntary smile on my face. Why *did* the Israeli cosmos seem so much nobler? When I looked up at them, it was like God said to me, "I made it all. The sun and moon, day and night, and you. See how great I am? I am big enough to trust." I found Luke 5: 26 to ring true for me every day: "Ev-

everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, 'We have seen remarkable things today.'" Each day was full of blessings abundant: growing relationships, seeing incredible sites, and simply soaking up moments of being in a land that is so central to my faith. I left more eager than ever to chase after the things of God, knowing that such a path does not follow the direction of the world.

I see now that the "characters" in the Bible are not just helpful for learning a kind lesson through their good deeds or mistakes. The people of these pages are real: God really created Adam in His image, Satan deceived Eve, and Eve chose to step outside of a perfect relationship with Creator God and pave her own path. Since sin crept into God's perfect world, God has not stopped rescuing his people. He still loves us with an Always and Forever Love as the stories tell. This Book is not merely a good pick-me-up or bring-me-down whenever I feel—or do not feel—like opening it. It is essential to my daily walk. It has become my food. And the best part about the Story is that it is True. The more I walked along the same ground as the Israelites and as Jesus, the more fully God opened my eyes to the wonder of His Spirit living in me, whether I am in the Holy Land or on Arkansas land. God shaped my mind and soul during those two weeks in eternal ways, and I am eternally grateful.