

## My Trip to the Holy Land

Preparing for the district presidents' tour to Israel with Imagen tours was, for me, just another trip. I did not have any lofty goals or high expectations of the trip. In my mind I was going to make some connection to the biblical places that I had learned about and now taught about, as well as getting to see some of the areas and lands where Jesus would have lived, roamed, and done ministry. The trip started off as most of my trips do with a long flight and lots of reading/TV watching.

Upon landing in Israel, I was delighted with the weather which was mild, in the middle 50's. We met our guide Erez and our bus driver Gus, and we were off to our first stop. I did not think that we were going to make stops right after the long flight. However, I was pleasantly surprised when we pulled over at our first site, Beth Semesh from 1 Samuel 6:1-21, where they had just begun an archeological dig. It was a great way to begin the tour and discuss what had happened in this location outside of Tel Aviv near Jaffa.

From the mountain top our guide pointed out the traditional burial site of Samson, noting that he had had a very bad hair day prior to his death. This started my Israel experience in a way that I was not prepared for; I was amazed how the stories and life of the Bible now suddenly came alive right before me. Seeing a biblical account now in living color touched me in a way that I was not prepared for. It would set the tone for the rest of the trip.

Our next stop was at the Valley of Elah from 1 Samuel 17. This is the historical setting for the account of David and Goliath. Again, jet legged and tired, I was transported into a movie-like scene seeing the cliff on one side and the rolling hill on the other side where the Philistines would have been. Standing at this sight I was moved to think about the ultimate trust in God that David had to have had looking out at the giant Goliath only having a sling shot and some small stones. I was overwhelmed as I thought about many events in my own life and the life of the Church where trust in God is the one central theme for us as His children. The day concluded with a short drive to Jerusalem and our hotel. After a full day and over 36 hours awake, the bed was a welcome sight.

Our second day began with a short drive and some rain as we ascended to the top of the Mount of Olives. Again, in my mind the events of the Bible were more spread out and not what I had pictured. As we began at the top of the Mount of Olives we descended (walking) towards the Garden of Gethsemane and what now stands as the Basilica of All Nations. One of the most dramatic moments for me on the trip occurred that day standing in the Garden of Gethsemane and looking up towards Jerusalem at the path that Judas and the soldiers would have traveled down to the garden. The overwhelming sense that Jesus would have seen these soldiers and Judas coming down a long path visible to any in the garden simply reinforced the biblical account that Jesus was willing and prepared to do His father's will in the midst of an unbearable event now begun.

Maybe this was even more dramatic for me given the upcoming Lenten tide that we will be celebrating in a few short weeks. I will forever be touched, and my teaching and preaching will be changed as I connected the biblical events, locations, and historical accounts of the Holy Land to what the text of the Scriptures report. Standing in locations such as the Garden of Gethsemane and within the walls of Jerusalem at the southern edge of the Temple mount, I began to see the biblical text more clearly and with a defined visible understanding. This led to the second truly overwhelming moment for me as we were walking the southern side of the temple mount and discussing the historical and archeological events that have been unearthed. I had not thought much about people saying that “Jesus had walked here,” as many tourists may be lured into making this an emotional event. For me, this changed as our guide began to show us one of the several ritual baths that all Jews would have washed in prior to entering the southern gate of the temple mount. At that moment, I could see Jesus, Mary, and Joseph being good Jews entering the temple through this gate as all Jews would have done.

It is moments like this that faith, biblical text, and reality collide as my faith is seen for the first time as a matter of the historical reality and not simply some story on a piece of paper. I have always had great faith and a vivid imagination regarding many of the biblical stories and accounts of the life of Jesus. However, after being in these places and seeing the application that they had to the life and time of the church, I will forever see the biblical accounts in a different way. As the Lenten season fast approaches, I would encourage you to pause and take a moment to see these events and the life of Christ as part of earthly history. I would also encourage you to see the message of the Gospel as one that has a living history that directly connects us to the love of the Father through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, His own son.

This trip had such an impact on me that I have agreed to lead a trip back for further study and exploration next year, January 13-22, 2021. If you're interested in coming along, please feel free to contact me, and I can get you more information. I will also be sharing more information in future Servant to Servants.