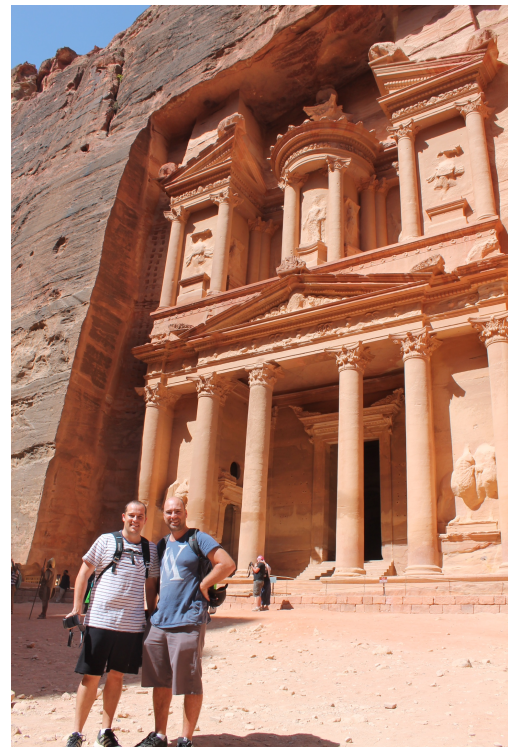




Reflections on Israel & Jordan Study Tour – June/July 2014

As many of you are aware, Neil Souter and I were fortunate enough to be able to join a study tour in June this year, hosted by SMBC (Sydney Missionary & Bible College). The tour aimed to take us to locations in Israel and Jordan to “walk in the footsteps of Jesus” and it certainly lived up to those expectations! We were joined by five other pastors, 30 students and three SMBC lecturers who were hosting the tour. Below are some highlights and reflections from the trip. I hope they’re an encouragement to you as you read them.

Arriving in Amman, the capital of Jordan, my first impressions were that Jordan was all I expected a country in the Middle East to be - ladies in burkas, men in white thawbs and a barren landscape with simple concrete housing structures. We travelled for approximately three hours south of Amman to the city of Petra. During that time there was very little to see except for barren, hot, dusty desert – the same desert that the Israelites wandered in for forty years!! Exploring the ancient city of Petra was one of the things I was most looking forward to on this trip, so to have it at the beginning of the trip was a bonus. Our task was to explore “the rose-red city” – a city inhabited by the Nabateans from 300BC, located in the Kingdom of Edom. The Edomites, as we will see this term at church, were the descendants of Esau and were rebuked by the prophet Obadiah for their pride (Obadiah 3) because their



The Treasury - Petra



The top of Petra looking out to Israel

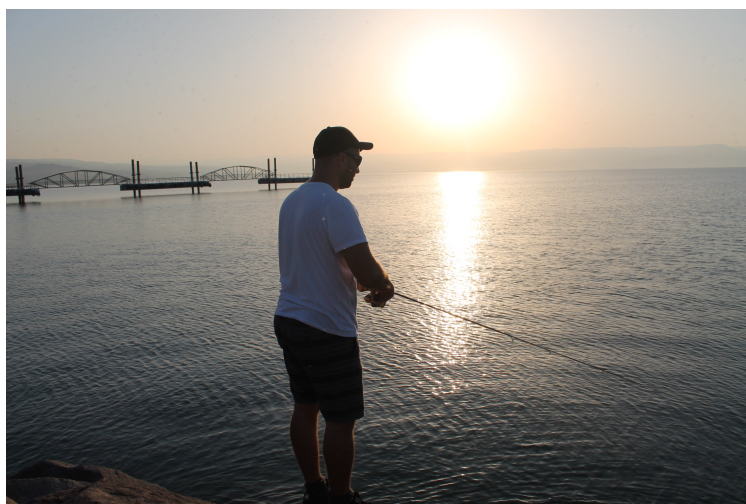
confidence lay in the fortified city they had built for themselves, rather than in the Lord. Exploring that fortified city, the ancient city of Petra, was one of the highlights of my life!! It was simply amazing – including tombs, houses, buildings, the “Treasury”, the “Monastery” – absolutely mind blowing that ancient builders could build such monumental structures!!

Following our visit to Petra, we travelled north to Mount Nebo – the mountain from which Moses viewed the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34). We were able to view the vast desert in the east, north and south, in contrast to the lush green Jordan Valley as we looked over towards Jericho in Israel. We were reminded from the Scriptures that only Joshua and Caleb were allowed to enter the Promised Land – everyone else in that generation was disallowed due to the hardening of their hearts in disobedience (Deut 34). We were encouraged to stop and check our own hearts – to see to it that none of us has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God (Heb 3:12), otherwise we will stumble in the wilderness and desert and never enter the Promised Land. It was a powerful time reflecting on God’s word and somewhat surreal being in the same place that the Israelites stood, led by Moses, in eager anticipation of what the Promised Land held for that next generation.



Jordan River

Upon entering Israel, we spent five or so days exploring the region around the Sea of Galilee in the north. This was the location of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry and we visited sites like Nazareth (where Jesus grew up), Capernaum (a key location for many of Jesus’ miracles), Cana (the location of Jesus’ first miracle turning water into wine) and the Mount of Beatitudes from which Jesus delivered the famous “Sermon on the Mount”. Of course, there were many other sites, but these were highlights for me. In particular, we were given an hour to sit and reflect on the Mount of Beatitudes where I was reminded afresh of my need to hunger and thirst after God. It was a powerful moment for me in God’s word and I was blown away by the imagery that Jesus used in his sermon, which is still very much a part of that landscape today – for



Neil fishing on the Sea of Galilee

example, the sparrows of the air, the lilies in the field and the city on a hill (Tiberius). These were good reminders to me of the authenticity of the gospel accounts of Jesus life and ministry. Capernaum was also a highlight, as we were able to stop and reflect on Jesus’ miracles in the synagogue and Simon-Peter’s home (Luke 4). I was particularly excited about this visit as I was preaching on Luke 4 upon our return home!! To be able to walk, stop and reflect in these significant places was so inspiring and to think that I’ve been able to walk in the footsteps of Jesus in Galilee is so surreal. Neil was able to have a fish on the Sea of Galilee and we both enjoyed time swimming in it too!! It was so refreshing and reminded us both of home!

After Galilee we left for the west coast stopping at Megiddo, Mount Carmel and Caesarea on the Mediterranean Coast. We visited the remains of Herod’s palace in Caesarea, which was phenomenal in size and structure, but a good reminder that our hope is not in worldly things that will perish, spoil and fade, but in the inheritance that Christ has prepared for us in Heaven. From Caesarea, we drove south to Jerusalem where we would spend the next five days exploring sites in and around this

famous city. Upon arrival, a number of us left our hotel for a night adventure through the “Old City”. Divided into quarters (Jewish, Armenian, Muslim & Christian), my first impressions were that we have arrived in a melting pot of religious activity that I’ve never quite experienced before. Surrounded by security check-points and military personnel with weapons on most corners, I was able to observe an example of the religious extremes of this city - the Jewish prayers at the Western Wall and then almost



The Western Wall

knocked over by the Muslims powering through the Old City for their start of Ramadan celebrations and calls for prayer. Over the course of the next few days, we were able to visit some very significant locations from the Bible including the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Old City of David, the Temple Mount, the Citadel of David and the Garden Tomb. I was amazed at the rich Christian, Biblical history that man-made religion has tried to squash through the worship of idols and religious wars, yet, that rich history still remains. This was, again, a reminder to me that our hope is not in this geographical location, despite it being the special place that God chose to enter the world, but rather in the New Jerusalem as we’re reminded of in Revelation 21. I was saddened that our stay in Jerusalem finished with heightened tensions between Jews and Muslims, which we’ve since seen played out on our news reports.



Adventures in the “Old City”



Reflecting on the steps of the Temple Mount

Our final day of tour involved a visit to the Dead Sea, Ein Gedi (the location believed to be where King David hid with his troops from King Saul – 1 Sam 23-24), Qumran (the location where the “Dead Sea Scrolls” were discovered) and Masada – the mountain plateau upon which Herod built his “holiday house with a view”!! We were lucky enough (??) to have a swim in the Dead Sea, but with temperatures in the 40’s and ground that produced blistered feet and with water so dead and salty it made me float, it made me very homesick for the beach at Narrabeen!!



The trip provided for me a rich reflection of the world into which our Saviour lived, ministered in and died. It is a world that longs for future hope, just like our world back home, and that hope comes only through Jesus. Having walked in some of his steps, I am resolved afresh to continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus, regardless of the people I’m with, the city I’m in or the nation I’m a part of because all need to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus entering the world to reconcile us to our Heavenly Father.

Neil cooling off at Ein Gedi



Floating on the Dead Sea - a very unusual experience!



At the top of Masada with the Dead Sea in the background. Masada was the location of Herod the Great’s “holiday house”