

GOING DEEPER

ACTS Israel Tour 2018

DAY FIVE: JEWS, GENTILES, ZEALOTS & BEATITUDES

On this day we immerse our selves fully into the cultural, religious, and political context of Galilee in the first century. If Galilee had had a daily newspaper, it would have been a fascinating read with stories about new ideas, trade, cultural conflicts, and military maneuvers.

Key Thought for Day Five

The gospel's offer of salvation is universal, for every yone in all times, places and cultures. It's intersection with each individual life, however, is often unique. Today we will consider how Jesus had a specific message for every group he encountered. To the gentiles in the Decapolis, his message was that the love and mercy of God was for them, too, not just Jews. The the zealot revolutionaries he had a message of peace. For the religious people satisfied in their pride, he had a warning. And for his followers he proclaimed the high standards expected of disciples in His kingdom. No matter who you were or are, the gospel of Christ comes with salvation and a call to new life that is higher, deeper, and richer than anything the world has to offer.

The journey map below will give you an idea of our path today. I show us circling around the south end of the Sea of Galilee, but our guide and bus driver may choose to go north at the start of the day. In any event, you can see the relationship of the sites we will visit.



[Journey Map for Day Five](#)

As we travel quite literally around the shores of Galilee, we meet different cultures and

hear the message of Jesus to each one.

Jesus and the Sea of Galilee: Lake Kinneret

Let's begin with an introduction to the Sea of Galilee. In Joshua 13:27 the Sea of Galilee is called Lake Kinneret, which is how it is usually referred to in modern Israel. Luke 5:1 calls it the Lake of Gennesaret, a related word. In other places it is labelled with the Greek and Hebrew words for "sea." In English, however, we typically use "sea" for a much larger body of water. It is actually a small to medium size fresh water lake. To give you an idea of the size of the Sea of Galilee, I've put an outline of the Sea to scale onto a satellite view of Vancouver. The Sea is 21 km north to south. You can stand on one side and easily see the other side.

Size comparison for the Sea of Galilee

Normally the Sea of Galilee is calm.

Overlooking the Sea of Galilee, looking across to the Golan Heights

But it can become stormy quite quickly. I saw it go from the calm state in the picture above to the whitecaps below in about 20 minutes.

Whitecaps on the Sea of Galilee

When cool air from the hills flows down and crashes into the warm air from the Jordan Valley, a storm can result. Here's a video taken on Galilee looking toward the city of Tiberias.



Kursi: The Mercy of God Is for Everyone, Not Just Jews

Our first stop will be at Kursi which in Jesus's time was in the "land of the Gadarenes" (Matthew 8:28-34), which in Mark and Luke is referred to as the land of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26). Sometimes in that day the entire area was called "Gerasa" and its chief city was Gadara. Gadara was one of the cities of the Decapolis, which in Greek means the "ten cities."

Below is the map from yesterday showing the Decapolis. On the west side of the Sea of Galilee, the region was largely Jewish, and the east side, in the Decapolis it was heavily gentile. When we visit this area, fix in your mind how near the Jewish and gentile areas were. Also, now that you have an idea of how small the Sea of Galilee is, you can have a better sense of how easily Jesus could step into a boat and in a relatively short time move from the Jewish culture to the gentile culture. The gospels tell us that he did this often.

It was after one such crossing from the Jewish side to the gentile side that Jesus encountered the fierce demoniac inhabited by a host of demons who called themselves “Legion.

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. (Mark 5:1-4)

We do not know today precisely where this miracle occurred. We know it was near the shore of Galilee because the pigs rushed into the water. And we know there was a steep bank sloping toward the water.

And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.

However, as you will see when we drive through the area, the actual site could have been one a number of places.

Kursi is the site tradition has chosen to honor as the location for this miracle, and it is a worthwhile choice to give us a picture of what the area was like. At the location of our stop we will visit the ruins of a monastery constructed on this location in the 5th century.

Before we leave Kursi it's worth reflecting on what happened to the demon-possessed man. After the man was healed of demons, the local people, no doubt frightened by the display of spiritual power they had witnessed, asked Jesus to leave. But the healed demoniac wanted to stay with Jesus.

As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him but said to him, ‘Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he

has had mercy on you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled. (Mark 5:18-20)

These words are a fitting introduction to our day travelling around the Sea of Galilee. At Kursi we celebrate the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, “Go home and tell your friends how much the Lord has done for you.”

Later in Mark 7:31-37 we read that Jesus returned to the Decapolis. The man must have done his proclamation well because now instead of asking Jesus to go, we read that the crowds brought people to Jesus for healing.

And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak’ (Mark 7:37).



[Learn More about Kursi](#)

Gamla: The Revolution of Jesus Is to Announce a Kingdom of Peace

From Kursi we will travel north west to Gamla on the Golan Heights. Kursi and Gadara tell us about Jesus’s ministry to the Greek-influenced gentiles. Gamla reminds us that Jesus connected with another, very different, group of people, the Zealots.

The zealots were an extremist political party violently opposed to Roman rule. They adopted terrorist tactics to harass the Roman occupiers. For the zealots, opposition to the Romans was rooted in their zeal for the Torah. They regarded themselves as agents of God’s justice, and they looked with eagerness to the appearance of the Messiah and planned to lead in the outpouring of his judgment.

“Simon” is listed among Jesus’s disciples in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and is always distinguished by calling him “the Zealot.” Simon was almost certainly associated with this group of rebels. He may have attached himself to Jesus in the hope that Jesus was the promised Messiah who would bring war against the Romans, but he learned a different way.

What message could Jesus possibly have had for these violent revolutionaries? Later

today we will visit the site of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:8)

Gamla became a gathering place for Zealots, and over time as their numbers increased they built a small city and an immensely strong fortress on the top of a steep ridge that was entirely impossible for troops to climb in force as you can see in the photo below.

The fortress ridge at Gamla

The hike down to the fortress is quite difficult and we will not attempt it, but we will stop to see some replicas of the siege weapons the Romans used during the war of AD 68 to 70 to attack and eventually overcome the fortress. As the Romans closed in as many as 9,000 Zealots and their families retreated to Gamla. 16,000 Roman legionnaires surrounded Gamla and for a month battered at it with stones and heavy iron tipped arrows shot from high-powered, long-range catapults.

We will learn more about the siege when we visit. Eventually the Roman battering rams broke through the fortress walls and soldiers rushed into the city. The Zealots fought fiercely but in the end all 9,000 were either slaughtered or jumped to their death from the walls. A quick death from falling on the sharp rocks no doubt seemed preferable to crucifixion at the hands of the Romans.

An ancient Roman siege weapon at Gamla



[Learn More about Gamla](#)

Chorazin: Proud and Self-Satisfied Religion Brings Judgment

From Gamal we will turn west across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee to visit the ancient site of Chorazin. At Chorazin as at Bethsaida and Capernaum, Jesus worked many miracles but the people were significant unresponsive.

The message of Jesus to the gentiles was an encouragement to proclaim his goodness

and grace. To the zealots he proclaimed a message of God's peace and peacemaking. But now, on the Jewish side of the lake he gives out a stern warning.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes! But it will be more bearable for Tyre and for Sidon in the judgment than for you! (Matthew 11:21-22)

Chorazin is very well-preserved and provides a good example of what an ancient Galilean town would have been like.



Chorazin

The Synagogue at Chorazin

There is a synagogue, probably from the 4th century, at Chorazin that includes a “seat of Moses.” I’ve included below a photo of my brother sitting in that seat. When we visit you can sit there, too. What Jesus had in mind, of course, is that the scribes and Pharisees enjoyed their position of authority and misused it to oppress the people with religious laws. So if you sit in that seat, make sure it’s only for a photo op!

‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. (Matthew 23:2-4)

Guy’s Brother in the ‘Seat of Moses’ at Chorazin

Mount of the Beatitudes: The High Standards of the Kingdom

The site of Chorazin is relatively barren, but from there we will move on to the traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount and the Church of the Beatitudes.

It's not hard to imagine Jesus gathering with a large crowd at this location overlooking the waters of Kinneret. As I noted in the discussion about traditional sites, we don't know with any certainty on which hillside the famous preaching took place. It could have been any of the hillsides in this area. Even more likely, what we have in the Sermon on the Mount is not a single sermon taught on one occasion but rather a collection of the teachings of Jesus that he would have taught on many occasions as he preached through this region.

Dress for a Religious Site.

Church of the Beatitudes

There is a beautiful church here, but the significance of the location is to help us envision what it may have been like to gather on a hillside to hear Jesus teach.



Mount of Beatitudes

The gospels place the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount in the first year of Jesus's ministry at time when his fame had spread widely enough to draw a significant crowd and now opposition from the religious authorities was beginning to gather.

The sermon's teachings are not "good news" or gospel proclamation but rather a depiction of the high expectations for character and behaviour expected of those who had already entered the kingdom. The standard he sets is high indeed, all the more so as we study His words more deeply. Jesus draws sharp distinctions between the traditional teaching his audience has heard and his new message.

In Matthew the sermon closes with a comment on the reaction of those who heard this teaching.

*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.
(Matthew 7:28)*

The Ancient Galilee Boat

At Kibbutz Ginosar on the shores of the Dead Sea we have an opportunity to see exactly what a first century Galilee fishing boat looked like. During a time of low water, two brothers from the Kibbutz stumbled across the remains of an ancient boat embedded in the mud. The members of the kibbutz mobilized with help from the Israel Antiquities Authority to extract the boat from the mud, put it through a careful process of preservation, and now on display at Ginosar. The craft we see today is an authentic, first-century boat, not a replica, not a reconstruction.



The Ancient Galilee Boat

Mark 4:35-40 tells the story of Jesus and His disciples on a stormy crossing of the Sea. As the wind and waves roared, Jesus fell asleep on a cushion.

But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. (Mark 4:38)

As you look at this ancient boat, it is easy to imagine the disciples frantically tried to keep the boat from sinking. The boat is not large, and it would have been low in the water with so many aboard.

With a bit of imagination you can picture Jesus sleeping on the cushion that Mark mentions. The cushion is a fascinating detail that has the mark of eye witness testimony, something recalled directly from memory. It also suggests a vivid contrast between the peaceful slumber of Jesus and the wild storm around him.

The ancient Galilee boat

To his disciples, the message of Jesus was “Why are you so afraid?” The reaction of the men, still early in their knowledge of Jesus was not calm but even greater fear.

Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

Magdala: Healing, Freedom, and Great Love

Our last ancient site for today is the recently uncovered village of Magdala, north of Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. In the “Learn More” below you can find fascinating details about the discovery of Magdala.



Magdala

For our purpose of today—a consideration of the many messages of Jesus—we can draw several critical thoughts. First, the gospels give deep witness to the compassion of Jesus for the crowds that came to him, and not just for the men but for the women as well. Mary who is called Magdalene, was almost certainly from this village of Magdala, and she had been dramatically healed by Jesus.

Soon afterward Jesus began a tour of the nearby towns and villages, preaching and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom of God. He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s business manager; Susanna; and many others who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples. (Luke 8:1-3)

The tour mentioned in this passage, like the Sermon on the Mount, occurred early in Jesus ministry in Galilee. Notice that Jesus took the women “with him” as he travelled and preached.

It was Mary Magdalene who arrived first at the tomb on the third day after the crucifixion. She found the tomb empty and mistook Jesus for the gardener. In one of the most deeply moving passages in the gospels, Jesus speaks to her a single, “Mary!” The sound of her name in the Lord’s own voice sparked instant recognition and she cried out “Rabboni” (John 20:11-18).

Boat Ride on Galilee

We plan this day to take a cruise on the Sea of Galilee. These things are always subject to weather conditions, so pray for clear skies and clam seas.

Storms on Galilee

The story of Jesus and the disciples in their boat during a storm is witness to the fact that this small lake can nevertheless host a mighty storm. The scientific facts that give rise to such storms are easy to understand. To the north of the lake (we will travel there) lies towering, usually snow-capped Mount Hermon. Cold air can flow south from the mountain. To the south of the lake is the deep Jordan River Valley, stretching down to the Dead Sea and into the desert. Hot air, flowing up from the south can collide quite violently with the cold air from Mount Hermon. The result can be significant winds and storm.

I personally witnessed this phenomena one day. As I stood by the lake reading, the water was as calm as you see in the picture of the boat above. Over the course of about half an hour, however, the conditions changed quickly. I took the picture below of the waves that had been stirred up by the winds. You can see not only the whitecaps on the waves but the deeper rhythm of the swells also. This was a smallish disturbance, but it was easy to see that under more severe conditions that waves could have been far more violent.

Choppy Seas on the Sea of Galilee

Passages to Study for Today

Here are some passages to read as you prepare for Day Three.

- For Kursi, study the narrative of the healing of the possessed by legion. Mark 5:1-20 and reflect on the impact these events had through the gentile villages of the Decapolis.
- For Gamla, let Jesus's choice of Simon the Zealot encourage study of Jesus's prophecy of coming judgment on the Temple in Luke 21:5 and following. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 and they threw down its stones.

(We will see them piled and jumbled where they landed.) These prophecies also look ahead to the final judgment at the end of our age.

- For Chorazin, consider how easy it is to see and even benefit from the goodness of God and yet turn away. Read the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35. Don't think of this story in terms of gaining and losing salvation and the difficulties of that discussion. No, the most serious problem in this example is that a man servant had personally encountered immense forgiveness was untouched, unchanged, and without any clue as to the forgiveness of God.
- For the story of Mary read John 20:11-18.

All of these many people and cultures were part of the world of Jesus in Galilee. Imagine one day—one very diverse day—in the life of the Son of God.

Day Four

Day Six