

# Tour of the Holy Lands - The Jordan River



Sadly, it would be our last night by the Sea of Galilee. The next day we drove off on a new adventure - a visit to the Jordan River for some kayaking. There at the dock we divided up, two to a kayak. The water moved pretty fast but we could all handle our paddles. There was lots of laughing as we wobbled along. Not many people back home can say they've kayaked down the Jordan.





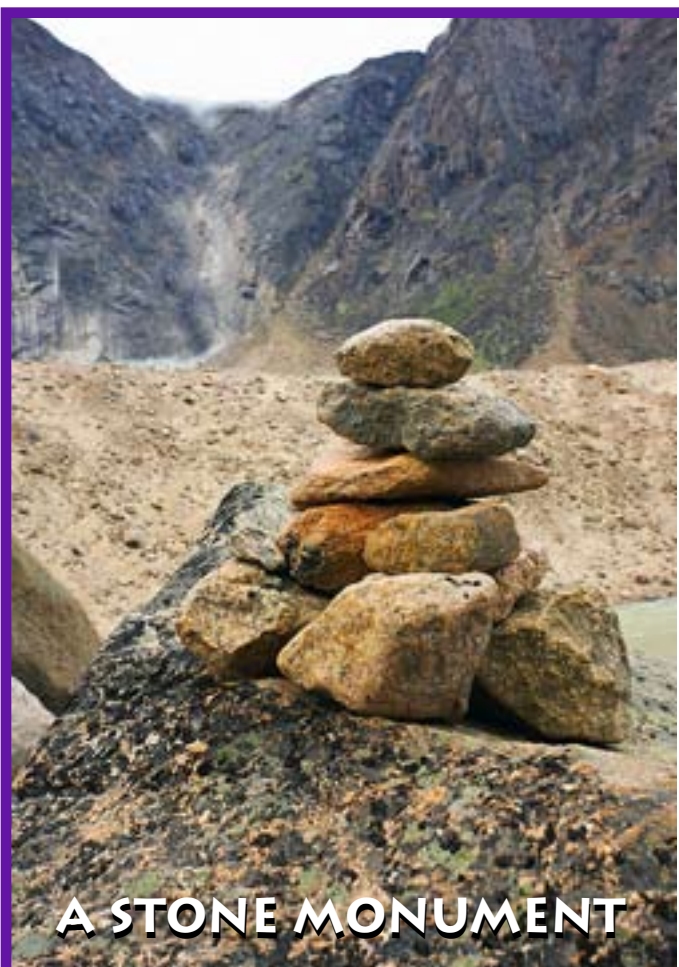
Most of our Bible stories about the Jordan River were shared on the bus as we drove south from the Sea of Galilee. We could catch glimpses of the river from our bus windows. We told the stories in the order found in the Bible, starting with the book of Joshua when the children of Israel crossed the river. (Josh 3:1-17; Josh 4:1-24) For forty years they were led by Moses. Now at the river's edge, there would be a change in leadership. That was the end of the road for Moses. He never crossed the river. He passed the leadership to Joshua, his second in command.



Joshua wanted to let the people know that it was God who was leading them, just as He had led Moses across the Red Sea and through the wilderness. Symbolically, God sat upon the Ark of the Covenant which they had been carrying for many years. The Ark was a beautiful box covered with real gold. It contained three memories of God's care: manna, the food God had provided for them while in the wilderness; Aaron's rod; and most importantly, the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. On top of the box were two golden-winged cherubs protecting the center on which God was supposed to be seated.



When Joshua gave the order at the river, four priests lifted the ark. They carried it by two outside poles since no one was supposed to touch the sacred Ark. As the priests stepped into the river, the river waters fifteen miles north suddenly stopped flowing, leaving the priests walking on the dry ground of the river bed. When they got to the middle, they stopped. Joshua ordered one man from each of the twelve tribes to pick up a stone from the middle of the river bed and take it to their camp to set up a monument.



**A STONE MONUMENT**



**TEN COMMANDMENTS**

The stones they picked up were for the sake of the children of the future. Years later, when children asked their fathers, “What do these stones mean,” they would tell them how the waters were cut off when the Ark passed over the river and God brought the children of Israel to the Promised Land. Everyone would know how mighty the hand of God was.

We wanted to see the monument, but we were told that all those things were lost now. Wouldn't it be neat if we were the ones to find the lost Ark, or the Commandments, or the stones that made up the monument? What a story that would make!



Riding along the Jordan River Valley looking out our windows at the river was like watching a movie. What great stories! What's next? (II Kings 2:1-18) It's about Elijah. Remember, we met him first on Mount Carmel. He was our hero. Well, in this story he was about to retire from teaching young prophets. Can you imagine being in Elijah's classroom!





As he bid good-bye to his three schools, one of his students began to follow and pester him. His name was Elisha and he wanted to be the next teacher. Elijah couldn't get rid of him. Elisha wouldn't give up. Every time Elijah tried to shake him loose, Elisha would say, "Not on your life!" Elisha was actually God's choice to take over his job, but he wasn't Elijah's choice. Elisha wasn't as fiery as Elijah. They reached the Jordan River after visiting the last school. Elijah took off his cloak, the symbol of his job as prophet. He rolled it up and struck the water. The river divided and the two men walked across on dry land. Sounds like the Joshua story, doesn't it? It just shows us that God can remove obstacles for anyone, anytime.



But this story isn't over yet. After crossing the river bed, Elijah must have finally been pleased with Elisha's persistence. Elijah said, "What can I do for you before I'm taken away?" Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. He may have thought he needed twice as much spirituality in order to fill his master's shoes. But what all prophets need is to see as God sees, and that can't be given away. Perhaps Elisha already had that spirit.

Suddenly a chariot and horses of fire appeared in the sky. It swooped down between the two startled men.





Then, Elijah was snatched up into heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw it happen with the eyes of a true prophet. He saw his teacher as the mighty defender of their country, bigger and better than the finest army. When Elisha saw Elijah rise beyond view, he knew his wish had been granted. He had the spiritual eyes to be the new leading prophet of Israel. Elijah's robe now belonged to Elisha.

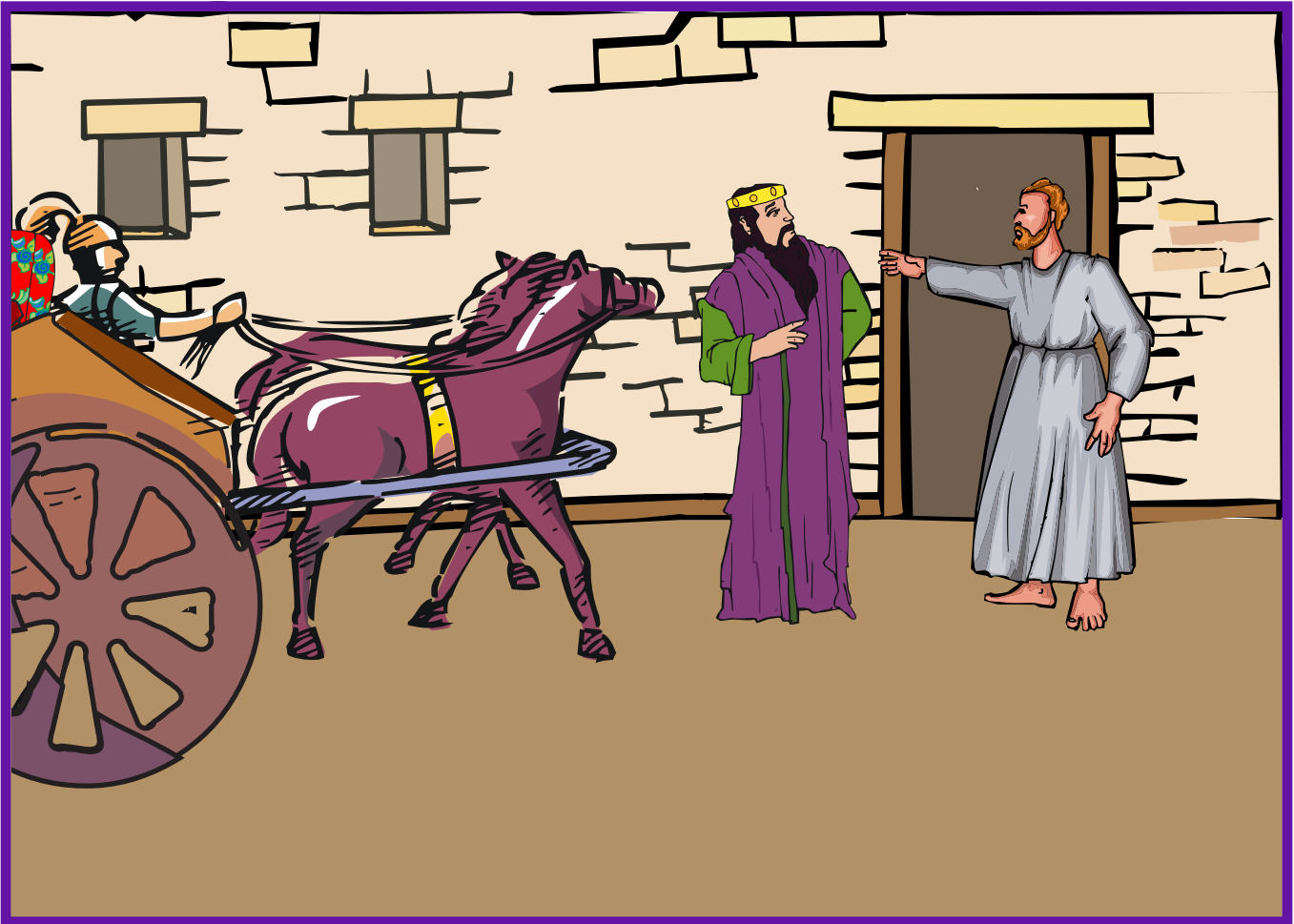
As soon as 50 of the other student prophets saw Elisha strike the Jordan with Elijah's cloak and return on dry ground; as soon as they understood that Elijah had risen to heaven without dying, they were willing to accept Elisha as their new teacher. Imagine how the sky must have lit up over the Jordan River that day with the fiery horses, the chariot and a whirlwind!



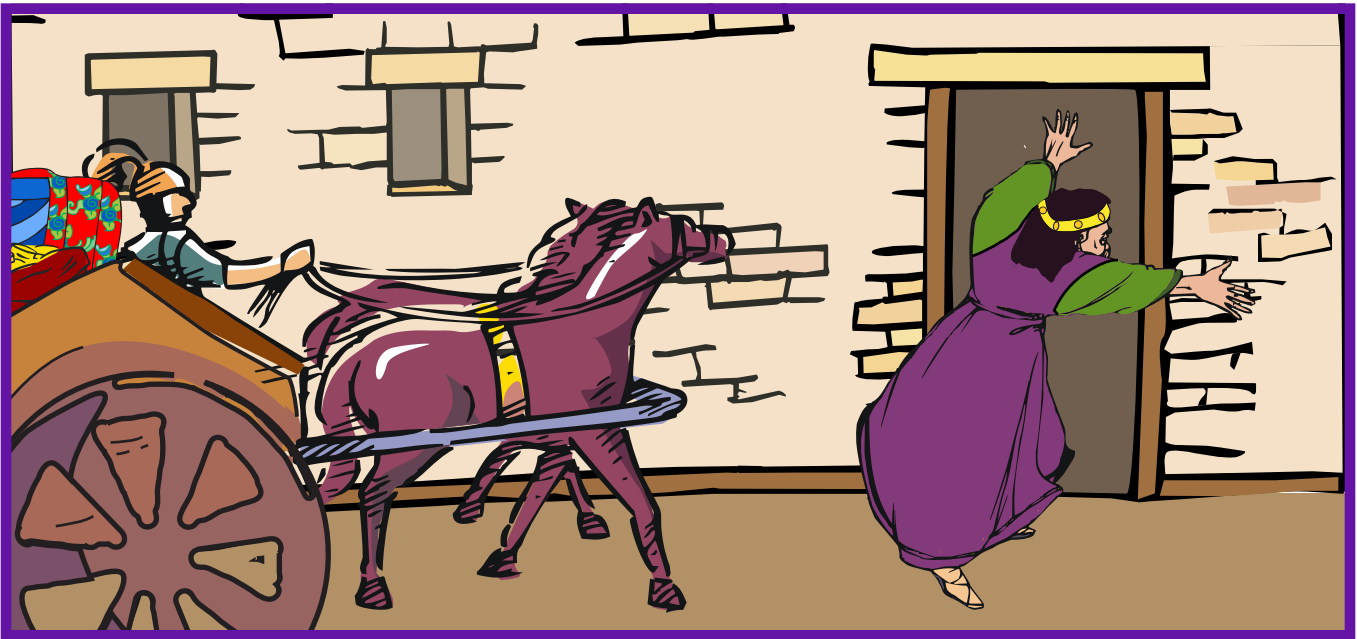
As we continued down the Jordan Valley, we left the story of the chariot in the sky and moved to a chariot on the ground, another favorite in II Kings 5:1-15. It began in a country across the river called Syria in the house of a general in the Syrian army, a hero, named Naaman. The Bible is full of heroes. But an even greater hero in this story is the young slave girl who had been captured in a raid over the border into Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. When she heard that Naaman was a leper, which means he suffered from a skin disease called "leprosy," she said to the lady of the house, "If only my master, Naaman, could meet the prophet of Samaria, he would be healed of his leprosy." We didn't know if we could be that brave to speak up and give suggestions to such an important man like Naaman. Not only was she just a young girl, but her people and his people were enemies.



When Naaman heard about the prophet in Samaria he took action. First he got the King of Syria to write a letter to the King of Israel asking for help. Then he piled up thousands of dollars worth of silver and gold and ten rolls of expensive fabrics to pay for the healing. He thought the richer he looked and the more important people he knew, the faster he would be healed. Naaman and his servants carried the payment to the King of Israel. But the king threw up his hands. “I can't heal you,” he said, “Who do you think I am? God?”



When Elisha, the prophet heard about it, he invited Naaman to come to his house. Elisha said, “That man will soon learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” Here’s where the story gets puzzling. Elisha refused to come to the door when Naaman knocked. We wondered why. Instead, he sent out his servant with a message, “Here's what Naaman should do to be clean: Return to the Jordan River and wash in it seven times.”



Just then, Naaman burst into anger and marched off, saying, “What kind of a cure was that? There I stood - in a great parade outside his door. He could at least have shown his face before me. I’m an important general. He could have waved his hand over me. Why should I have to do anything...especially such a common thing as washing?” He kept complaining. “If it’s rivers I need, I can wash at home. We have two very fine rivers - Abana and Pharpar. They flow from the same mountain range as the Jordan. They may be smaller, but they are cleaner, not like the muddy Jordan.”





What a loud mouth Naaman had! We tried to guess why one river was better than another. It couldn't be the water. Maybe the Jordan was a symbol. We tried to guess what that symbol might be. Maybe it marked the end of wandering in the wilderness. Maybe it stood for the beginning of a new life in the Promised Land.

Naaman's servants tried to reason with him gently. They said, "My Father, if the prophet had told you to do something grand, wouldn't you have done it? Why can't you just wash yourself?" They knew their master would listen to good sense. And he did. This time he listened. The proud soldier rode in his chariot to the river, jumped in, and dipped seven times. Sure enough, his skin became firm and healthy. Naaman couldn't wait to meet Elisha in person and thank him. The big man became a little boy again. And it all started with the suggestion of a little slave girl.



Here's another Elisha story at the Jordan. (II Kings 6:1-7) Remember that Elisha had become the new head of Elijah's prophet schools? One of the schools needed a larger building. We guessed that many more students were trying to enroll. They went to Elisha for permission to build. They asked him, "Can each of us cut down a tree from the banks of the Jordan River?" They would use the wood for their new building. Since they couldn't afford to hire builders or buy tools, they decided to build it themselves and borrow the tools. Elisha agreed. They asked him to go with them. They got to the river and began chopping down trees. But as one of them was swinging his axe, the axe head flew off and sank into the river.

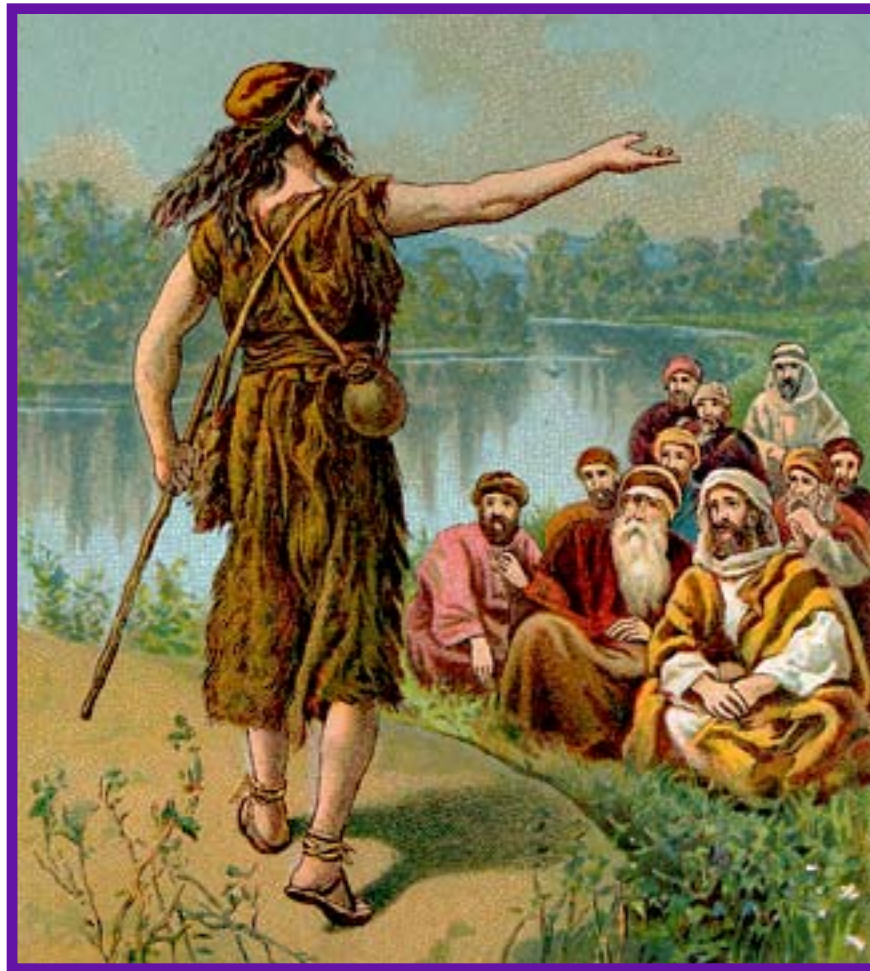




The man cried out, “Oh no, what shall I do, sir?” The young man was honest. He wanted to return the axe. He had no money to buy another. Iron was hard to find.

Elisha was a special prophet. He answered calls for God’s help from many different people - from a foreign general, from widows, and from this young builder. Elisha said, “Where did it sink?” The man pointed. Then Elisha did something that didn’t make any sense. He cut off a branch and threw it into the river where the iron had sunk. The river there was so deep and fast that there was very little chance the stick would land at just the right place. Besides, sticks don’t sink, and we don’t know anything that would make iron float. But Elisha the prophet never did anything without listening for guidance from the Lord. And the next thing they knew, the axe head floated to the top. “There you are, pick it up,” said Elisha. Wow! Now the honest young prophet could help his friends that day and still return the borrowed tool when he was finished. Elisha knew from history that the river had parted for the feet of priests. He’d seen it part for Elijah’s cloak, and he’d parted it himself. There are no barriers to God’s work. If the river could make way for *those* holy purposes, it could also give up a tool for *this* holy purpose.





Many years passed between Elisha and Jesus, but the Jordan River kept flowing. When Jesus came down to the Jordan, John the Baptist was already there, preaching and baptizing. John's message was that people must change their ways of thinking and their actions. They should admit that they had been disobeying the Commandments. They should pledge from now on to be honest, kind, and good, inside and outside. After his audience made their promises, they were baptized by John in the river. Washing with water was a symbol of washing away what was unclean and starting fresh again.



“The reason I am preaching this message,” he told them, “is that the kingdom of heaven is near.” When they heard that, some began to think that John was the Messiah they had been waiting for. John said, “No, someone greater will come, so much greater, that I’m not even good enough to be his slave. His method of baptism will not be symbolic, like mine. It will be true cleansing, and not by water that cleans only the outside, but by divine Spirit that reveals the holiness in a person. His baptism will also be by fire that brings out the purity in a person.”

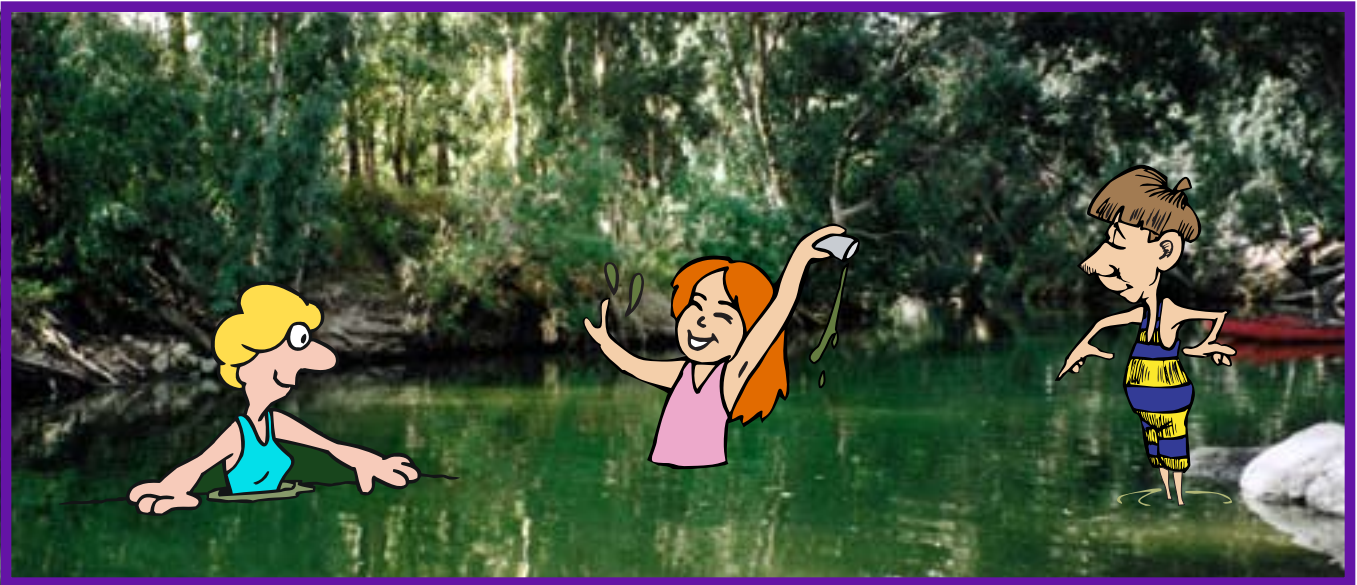


We got out of the bus and stood on the bank of the river. We knew the Bible story. We pictured a stranger walking down the path just next to us. He had spent 30 years in Nazareth getting ready for this day. He got in line to be baptized. Soon it was his turn. No one had seen him before. But John recognized him right away and said, “There is no way I am going to baptize *you!* *You* need to baptize *me!*” The stranger was Jesus and his answer to John was, “Let it be so, for now.” Yes, Jesus would one day baptize with Spirit and with fire, but for now it was just one step at a time.





After being baptized, Jesus stood up out of the water and in a flash the heavens split open. He saw the Spirit of God come down like a dove upon him. As the promised Messiah, Jesus knew he possessed all the spiritual power he needed to accomplish the most important mission in the world. And if that wasn't enough, he heard a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son. I'm so very pleased with him!" Jesus would have read those promises in the Scriptures, and now he knew they were pointed at him. (Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1)



We stood quietly for a while, then waded in the river, thinking about how important this moment was. Whatever challenges Jesus would face in the coming three years, he could always remember this day. He could relive this moment when he felt his Father's great love and power. He would know that it would always be available to him. He taught his followers how to find that same love and power, and we continue to learn those same lessons today.

Now, everybody ready? It's back to the bus.

Don't forget to dry yourselves off!





I think we all agree this has been a whirlwind summer, one we will never forget. Some of us will write about it, some will make an album or a video, some will speak to churches, some will share with Sunday School classes, some will host a party. Some will write letters back to new friends in Israel.

We'll be taking home with us other new friends - the old Bible characters. Now we know where they lived, the food they ate, the land they walked and the air they breathed. We can point to their homes and their journeys on our maps.

And believe it or not, there's more. Yes, if we can come back next summer, we'll see even more of this Holy Land. They tell us we can find out about Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, David, Gideon, Moses and Jonah, plus even more about Jesus. We can ride a camel and a horse. We can climb a mountain, spend the night in the desert and float in the Dead Sea. And best of all we can keep sharing what we learn with our friends.

So we say, "Shalom" in Hebrew or "Peace and Good-bye for now."