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A Journey to the Acts of the Apostles

By Tal Davis

Recently, my family took a trip of a lifetime. We flew to Rome, spent sometime there, then took a six day cruise around the Greek Islands and western Turkey. Needless to say it was exciting for all of us, but for me it was specially meaningful because I was able go to some of the places where Peter, Paul, and John lived, preached the gospel, and died. In this article, I want to share a few of my impressions of some of those locations as I experienced them.

Let's start in Rome. The first place in the "eternal city" we visited was an ancient temple called the Pantheon. It was built by the Romans originally about 25 B.C. for Emperor Augustus, and then rebuilt in A.D. 126 by Emperor Hadrian. It is one of the best preserved ancient buildings in Rome with a domed ceiling over one hundred feet high. It's name comes from the Greek language meaning "all the gods." In A.D. 609 it was converted to a Catholic basilica to honor Mary and the Christian martyrs who died in Rome. It is incredibly impressive. You have to wonder how they were able to construct such an edifice without the aid of modern machines. The thing that amazed me most, however, about that temple, and others we saw, was how and why the Romans and other pagan cultures built such enormous shrines to honor their false gods.

Next we visited Vatican City, the center place of the Roman Catholic Church and home of the Pope. Since 1929, Vatican City has been a sovereign and independent state located inside Rome. It is the smallest independent country in the world. Of course, the Vatican was not there in biblical

days, but has a long and somewhat checkered history. Perhaps the most impressive part of that tour was the Sistine Chapel. Just looking around and up at the paintings by Michelangelo was awe inspiring. The most famous, of course, is the one at the top center of the ceiling of God creating Adam. I have seen pictures of it for years, but to see it with my own eyes was something else. I just stared up at it.

My feelings about the Vatican were mixed. I was certainly impressed by all the incredible art and outward expressions of devotion to God. Nonetheless, I was disturbed by all the external focus on Mary, the Pope, the saints, and the church. Most of the people touring were Catholics, and they were obviously thinking that by being there they were gaining some kind of special favor with God. You could see they regarded it as a holy place. However, it was as though a personal relationship with Jesus was lost in all the pomp and religiosity.

The next interesting site we saw in Rome was the Great Circus (Circus Maximus). This is where as many as 150 thousand ancient Romans gathered to watch athletic events, religious festivals, and chariot races. Built several hundred years before Christ, it was an oval track that looked to be about two miles long between two hills. In ancient days stands were constructed on the hillsides where the people sat. You can almost hear the crowds cheering as you gaze down at the track.

The next site we visited was the Colosseum. Now that is truly the most impressive place we went. If you have ever seen the movie Gladiator with Russell Crowe, you know, thanks to CGI, how huge the giant stadium was in its heyday of about A.D. 125. Today only about

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half of the external structure remains. We were able to go inside down below the main level to where the gladiators prepared for their fights and where animals were caged. It was chilling to say the least. Both the animals and gladiators were hoisted up to the main stage floor level on man-powered elevators through trap doors. There they fought to the death. We then went up to the stage level where part of it is reconstructed of wood. I stood and looked around at the size of the huge amphitheater around me that once held up to 80,000 spectators. I was struck by the fact that so many men died in that place just to entertain the blood thirst of the Roman citizens. By the way, our tour guide told us, and I have heard it said before, that no real evidence exists that any Christians were martyred in the Roman Colosseum.

The next place we visited in Rome was the ruins of the ancient Forum. This was very interesting to me for several reasons. It was, in ancient times, sort of the center of the world. It is where the Romans did their commercial and political business. When Roman generals returned victorious from wars, they would be paraded down the street to the joyous cheers of the crowds. The Roman Senate had its meeting hall there, and a number of temples to various gods and dead emperors were built along the way. It was also where Marc Antony delivered his eulogy for Julius Caesar. My mind went back to the book of Acts which indicates that Paul lived in Rome awaiting his trial before the Emperor (Acts 28:16-30). So he probably walked those same streets preaching the gospel to whoever would listen. Later we will talk about Paul's journey to Rome.

At the top of the nearby Palatine Hill (another place we visited) was the Emperor's palace, from which he

would descend to the Forum to address the people and attend to state business. Ruins of the palace walls and tiles from the floors are still visible. Places where swimming pools once laid are now filled with sand. Clearly the emperors had opulent lifestyles, but history says most of them did not live long or happy lives. In most cases political intrigue led to their overthrows and deaths. Some of them, like Nero and Caligula, were just plain crazy. Popular emperors were declared to be gods after their deaths, and temples would be erected for them around the empire. In any case, the Roman Empire and army was the most powerful in ancient history.

After staying in Rome for few days, we boarded our cruise ship to sail to the Greek islands and to Turkey. Turkey is what was, in biblical times, the Anatolian Peninsula, or Asia. It was the location of the seven cities to which the resurrected Jesus wrote letters to their churches. They were transmitted through the Apostle John as recorded in Revelation, chapters two and three. We visited the excavated site of one of those cities, Ephesus. This was the highlight of the trip for me.

Ephesus was, in the New Testament era, one of the largest and most impressive cities in the Roman Empire. It was located near the western shore of Asia Minor with a busy harbor. Second only to Rome, it was a major center of political, religious, and commercial life in that region. Its most significant landmark was its huge temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Artemis (Roman Diana) built in 560 B.C. The temple was destroyed by the Goths in A.D. 268 and later ransacked and abandoned.

The city was devastated by a fire in 356 B.C., but was rebuilt in 250 B.C. By 133 B.C., the Romans had taken complete control of its civic and military life. In the time of the of Acts, it had a population of about 250,000 people. We were able to walk through

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the excavated ruins of the city's main ancient thoroughfare. Our tour guide indicated that quite possibly Paul, who lived and ministered there for two years, had set up a tent making shop along the street. (Acts 19:10) He also reminded us that the Apostle John lived there and pastored the church until his exile to Patmos where he wrote the Revelation. One of the city's most notable ancient buildings still standing is its library. At one time it contained over 3,000 scrolls, making it the second largest library in the ancient world.

But without a doubt the most impressive remains still visible in Ephesus is its large theater. The theater was originally carved out on the side of the Pion Hill about 250 B.C. and expanded in 40 B.C. In biblical times it seated as many as 25,000 patrons in sixty-six steep rows of seats divided into three sections. It is still used today as a venue for concerts. As I stood looking at its towering stands, I recalled how Paul's successful ministry in Ephesus had angered some of the silver smiths who made shrines to the goddess Artemis. A riot ensued and two of Paul's associates, Gaius and Aristarchus, were dragged before an enraged mob in the theater. There, for two hours, a frenzied crowd shouted at the top of their voices, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Eventually, the city clerk was called and calmed the mob and released the disciples. (Acts 19:23)

After our visit to Ephesus we started our voyage back to Italy. As we sailed, I recalled Paul's journey to Rome to face trial before the Emperor. As you may know from reading Luke's account, Paul had been charged in Jerusalem as being a "pestilent fellow" and for sedition (Acts 24:5 KJV). The actual reasons were that he was preaching to the Gentiles and talking about the resurrection, which upset the Sadducees. In any case, after being shuffled about to several courts Paul eventually took advantage of his right as a Roman citizen and appealed his case to the emperor himself. As a result, he was put aboard a ship accompanied by a Roman guard, and sailed to Rome. The voyage was anything but easy. They endured heavy storms and survived a shipwreck on Malta. Eventually they sailed from Malta, north to Sicily, and

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on to Rome through the Strait of Messina. (Acts 21-28) Our cruise went through that same strait on the way back to Rome. I had never realized how narrow the pass is until we went through it. But I imagined how Paul must have felt as he went by the same mountains on both sides of the shallow waterway.

Eventually we made our way back to Rome and caught our flight back home. The Acts was the first book in the Bible that I read after becoming a Christian more than fifty-five years ago. I remember how exciting it was to trace the stories of the early believers. So, I will never forget those moments I spent standing in places that I read about – where John, Paul, Peter, Luke, and others lived and ministered. If you ever have the chance to go, take it!