**WILL I CROSS THE RIVER?**

***A Biblical Call To Love The Arab People And Reach Them With The Gospel***

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During the course of this Summit we have studied….

* Daniel’s prayer of repentance
* the Apostles’ prayer for boldness
* And Jesus’ prayer for unity.

We have heard from dear Israeli and Palestinian brothers and sisters on the exciting things the Lord is doing in the Land, the challenges they face, and how we can pray for them with specificity.

Now, as we come to the close the 2018 Epicenter Prayer Summit, let us to zoom up a bit and take a look at what the Lord is doing in the Arab nations that surround Israel. The Lord loves them dearly, and they are a key part of The Joshua Fund’s calling to bless not only Israel but her neighbors and to strengthen the Church throughout the Epicenter to fulfill the Great Commission.

The text the Lord has put on my heart is found in Mark chapter 5. Would you turn there in your Bibles and we’ll examine verses 1 through 20?

*They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. 3He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, 4for 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. 5Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.*

*6And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. 7And crying out with a loud voice, he said, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” 8For he was saying to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” 9And Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” 10And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, 12and they begged him, saying, “Send us to the pigs; let us enter them.” 13So he gave them permission. 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.*

*14The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. 15And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. 16And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. 17And they began to beg Jesusto depart from their region.*

*18As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. 19And 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.” 20And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.*

[Note: there are parallel passages in Matthew 8:28-34 and Luke 8:26-39.]

**Key Points**

Let’s begin with a few observations.

* Three times in this passage someone is “imploring” Jesus for something.
  + The demons “implored” Jesus not to “torment” them (5:7) and “not to send them out of the country." (5:10)
  + The people of the nearby city “implored” Jesus “to leave their region.” (5:17)
* The man saved from the demons “implored” Jesus “that he might accompany Him” back to Israel and participate in Jesus’ ministry there.
* It’s worth noting that Matthew’s account says Jesus cast demons out of two men.
  + Nevertheless, Mark and Luke record that only one man showed his gratitude and wanted to follow and serve the Lord wholeheartedly.
  + What happened to the other man? The Scriptures do not say, and we’re left with the implication that only one of them truly embraced the Lord.
  + How sad – it’s evocative of Luke 17 when Jesus heals the ten lepers back in Israel, yet how many of them came back to bow down and worship Him as Savior and Lord? Only one.
  + Likewise, Judas Iscariot walked with Christ for upwards of three years. Yet he never truly embraced Jesus as God and Messiah but rather betrayed the Lord and doomed himself to Hell.
  + This is a painful truth we must come to understand and accept in the ministry – only a few “enter through the narrow gate” and find eternal life, but “the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.” (Matthew 7:13)
* It should also be noted that both the demons and the people of the nearby city were granted their request. The saved man was not.
  + Jesus granted the demons’ request to enter the nearby herd of swine.
  + Likewise, Jesus granted the people’s request to leave their region and do no more miracles amongst them, much less teach them how to know God and enter His Kingdom.
  + But as for the saved man, the text says that Jesus “did not let him come” to Israel to follow Him.
  + Rather, Jesus said to the man, “Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you.” (5:19)
  + To the man’s great credit, he obeyed the Lord. “[H]e went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis [the ten Roman cities on the East Bank of the Jordan River] what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.”

**Key Lessons**

What is God trying to teach us in this passage?

Why did Jesus cross the Jordan River?

Indeed, why did Jesus enter the land of the Gentiles, a land we today call the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan?

Didn’t Jesus say, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”?

Yes, He did, in Matthew 15:24.

But remember that He knew that most of the house of Israel would initially reject Him as Messiah.

Remember, too, that the Hebrew prophets told us the ultimate calling of the Messiah was not merely to save Jewish people but people from every nation.

* In the Abrahamic Covenant – Genesis chapter 12 – the Lord makes clear that through Abraham’s seed (the coming Messiah) He would bless “all the families of the earth.”
* In Isaiah 49:6, the Lord God said to His Anointed One (the coming Messiah), “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light to the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
* In Daniel chapter seven, the Hebrew prophet sees a vision of the coming Kingdom of the Messiah. “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him [the Son of Man] was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that *all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him*. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14)
* In Hosea chapter two, the Lord says, “I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, and I will say to those who were not My people, ‘You are My people!’ and they will say, ‘You are my God!’” (Hosea 2:23)
* One more example (though I could go on): in Joel chapter two, the Lord says through the Hebrew prophet, “It will come about in the last days that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind” and “before the great and awesome Day of the Lord comes it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Joel 2:28,31-32)

Amen – he Bible could not be clearer: God loves Israel and her neighbors!

God’s heart is not either/or – it’s both/and.

That’s why Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that the salvation and redemption and joy He was bringing was not limited to the Jewish people.

Consider just two classic examples:

* John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
* Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Should it be surprising, then, that here in Matthew chapter 5 we see Jesus crossing the River to save one Gentile man and sending that man throughout the Decapolis to tell his people the Good News of God’s love? Not at all!

It’s true that Christ didn’t grant the saved man his request. But that was because Christ had a better plan. He had a mission for that man, to reach his own people with the Gospel, and in this the Lord knew the man would find great joy.

Sometimes the greatest answer to our prayer is when God says “no.”

We can bring any request before Him. But our Father knows what’s best for us. When He says no, it’s not because He doesn’t love us, but because He does.

The more mature we are in Christ, the quicker we will be grateful when God says “no,” knowing that if we are humble and patient, He will guide us to something better – even a mission to reach a people group with the Gospel that perhaps we never expected, perhaps a people we had never really loved.

This is where the deepest joy in Christ is found….

* not in getting our way, but in going His.
* not in doing our will, but in doing His.

Is this not what Jesus was speaking of in John 15?

* *“These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full…. You did not choose Me but I chose you and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.”* (John 15:11, 16)

**God’s Great Love For The Arab People**

Lynn and I could not love Israel and the Jewish people more. The same is true of the entire Joshua Fund team.

But we do not believe it’s enough just to bless Israel. God has called us to bless all the people of the region.

Why? Because….

* Jesus loves the Palestinians.
* He loves the Lebanese.
* He loves the Syrians and the Jordanians and the Iraqis and the Egyptians.
* Jesus loves all of the people of the Epicenter.
* He loves them.
* He died for them.
* He rose for them.
* He’s coming back for them.
* And He commands us to love them with His deep and everlasting love.

The question is: How?

How can any of us make a real difference in this part of the world?

You and I can’t solve the refugee crisis. The Church cannot solve the education crisis in a world rife with illiteracy. Or cure poverty or all diseases. Or rescue all people from drug and alcohol abuse.

Governments and businesses invest billions of dollars in such worthy projects. So, too, does the United Nations. Even still, it’s only a drop in the bucket.

The Church doesn’t have this level of resources. The Joshua Fund certainly doesn’t.

So, you and I must focus like a laser on what the Church – not government, not the U.N. – is uniquely called to do, and that is to fulfill the Great Commission.

* *“God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* (I Timothy 2:4)
* God desires that *“none should perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:9)
* And yet, the Apostle Paul rightly asks: *“How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’”* (Romans 10:14-15)

This is the mission of the Church: to love Christ by loving those who don’t yet know Him. That means reaching every Jew and Gentile in the Land of Israel with the Gospel of Jesus Christ – but we cannot not stop there.

You and I need to cross the River.

Motivated by love and compassion, we need to give everyone throughout the Epicenter the opportunity to hear the Gospel message and in their own heart language and give them the chance to make a decision for themselves – to receive Christ by faith or reject Him.

We don’t want to pressure or force anyone.

To the contrary, we want to love them enough to make sure they get the chance to hear God’s free offer of salvation and get their questions answered and make their own decision – *yes or no? In or out?*

If they say yes, then loving them means helping them be discipled, pastored, encouraged, prayed for and taught how to introduce their families and friends to Christ.

This is the heart and passion of The Joshua Fund. Indeed, this is the heart and passion of everyone who has spoken at this Epicenter Prayer Summit.

Because it is the heart of God.

We know not everyone will say yes to Christ’s free gift of salvation and adoption into His royal family.

But we also know that many will say yes – not just on this side of the River, not just in Israel, but on the other side of the River, throughout the Muslim world – and in this we have great joy!

*“I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands**and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”* (Revelation 7:9-10)

The Biblical prophecies are clear: a great harvest is coming.

The only way we can fail is not heed the call of our King.

**What Is God Doing In The Arab World?**

The Church in the Arab world has been deeply shaken in recent years.

* Followers of Jesus Christ have been targeted by Radical Islamist terrorists throughout the region, and horribly persecuted.
* Churches have been bombed, set ablaze and riddled with machine gun fire.
* Christians have been captured, enslaved, tortured, starved, and beheaded.
* Some have even been crucified for holding fast to the Savior.

And yet, amidst such darkness, the Holy Spirit is on the move.

Followers of Jesus Christ in this region are boldly and creatively communicating the Gospel to their people, using satellite television, radio broadcasts, the Internet, Bible distribution, literature distribution, and their own personal witness to reach more people than ever before.

Hundreds of millions of Muslims are now able to hear, read and consider the Gospel message in their own heart languages, and remarkably, many are open to saying “yes” to Christ for the first time in their lives.

I commend to your attention the following: [**“Believers In Christ From A Muslim Background: A Global Census”**](http://www.religjournal.com/articles/article_view.php?id=101), a 19-page peer-reviewed article written by two respected Christian scholars.

Dr. Duane Alexander Miller is a professor at St. Mary’s University in Texas.

Patrick Johnstone is the long-time editor of [***Operation World***](http://www.amazon.com/Operation-World-Century-Updated-Revised/dp/1850783578?ie=UTF8&keywords=operation%20world&qid=1464352218&ref_=sr_1_3&sr=8-3), a series of books that carefully documented the state of Christianity in every country on a planet and which sold more than 2.5 million copies.

Their study, published 2015 in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion (*out of Baylor University), examined all the research that has been done on Muslim conversions to Christianity from 1960 to 2010.

They carefully analyzed country-by-country data and tried to take special care to weed out double-counting, possible exaggerations, and a range of other issues and variables.

Their conclusions were stunning: From 1960 to 2010, the number of Muslims that have converted to faith in Jesus Christ has grown from fewer than 200,000 to some 10 million people.

In a world of 1.6 billion Muslims, is 10 million conversions to Christ enough? Certainly not. But we are in the early stages of a Great Awakening in the Muslim world and pastors throughout the Epicenter are reporting encouraging signs of hope.

After centuries of spiritual drought, the Church in the Middle East is truly growing again, slowly but steadily.

And remember, this study only goes up through 2010. So many more Muslims have come to Christ since then!

To be sure, one must be careful with numbers. Some Western ministry leaders and local pastors can, at times, be tempted to exaggerate progress to friends and donors. Likewise, Radical Muslims and Jewish anti-missionaries can report to their compatriots and donors vastly inflated numbers of Jews and Muslims coming to faith in Jesus Christ in an attempt to exaggerate the “threat” a growing number of believers pose to them.

That’s why I appreciate the careful work Miller and Johnstone have done.

That said, the vast majority of the Muslim conversions reported in their study took place in places like Indonesia and Iran.

Here in the Epicenter – in Israel, the Palestinian Authority and in the five Arab countries around the Holy Land where The Joshua Fund works – the numbers of people coming to Christ so far are far lower.

Recently, The Joshua Fund released a report that provides a useful if imprecise snapshot of the state of the Church in the Epicenter. It was based on interviews with a wide range of Arab pastors and ministry leaders in the region, and a review of articles and studies on the trend lines.

In the time that remains, I want to share with you some of our findings in the hopes that it will give you more clarity -- and a sense of urgency – as you pray.

* In the Palestinian Authority, there are an estimated 1,500 Arab Evangelical Christians. There are some 200 to 250 Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) who live in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem. However, few of them attend church out of concerns for their safety or because they don’t feel welcome by other Christians. Worldwide, an estimated 30,000 Palestinian Evangelical Christians live outside of the Palestinian Authority, many of them having moved to the U.S. and Europe.
* In Israel today, there are about 5,000 Arab Evangelical Christians, many of whom feel closely connected to their Palestinian brothers and sisters.
* In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, there are currently between 10,000 and 15,000 Evangelical Christians. In addition, an estimated 10,000 Jordanian Evangelical Christians reside outside of the Kingdom, having moved primarily to the U.S., Europe and the Gulf. While most Jordanian Evangelicals have come to faith from nominal Christian backgrounds, there are now at least 1,000 Jordanian MBBs – possibly more, but it is difficult to know precisely. While more than 96% of Jordanians are Muslim, there is a total of some 145,000 Jordanians who are self-described Christians. Most of these are Catholic, but they also include Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Protestants and other historic denominations.
* In Egypt, there are approximately 2,000,000 Protestant Christians living in Egypt – far and away the largest Evangelical Christian population of any country in the Arab world. In fact, while more than 86% of Egyptians are Muslim, there is a total of some 11 million Egyptians who are self-described Christians. Most of these are Coptic Orthodox, but they also include Catholics, Protestants and other historic denominations.
* In Syria, we believe there are currently some 21,000 to 23,000 Evangelical Christians, though it is impossible to know the precise number because many have had to flee the country. While some 90% of Syrians are Muslim, there has always been a sizable Christian minority. However, as a result of the civil war and the genocide waged by militants loyal to Islamic State, many Christians have left the country. The number of historic Christians (Syrian Orthodox, Catholic, and others) living in Syria has dropped from 1.25 million just a few years ago to about 500,000 today.
* In Iraq, we believe there are currently between 1,000 and 3,000 Evangelical Christians. Worldwide, there are an estimated 53,000 Iraqi Evangelical Christians, however most now live outside of Iraq, many of them in the U.S. and Europe, having felt the need to leave Iraq during periods of such war and turmoil. While some 96% of Iraqis are Muslim, there has always been a sizable Christian minority. However, as a result of wars, insurgencies and the genocide waged by militants loyal to Islamic State, many Christians have left the country. Indeed, the number of historic Christians (Catholic, Chaldean Orthodox, etc.) living in Iraq has dropped from about 1.5 million just a few years ago to between 200,000 and 300,000 in 2017.
* In Lebanon, there are currently an estimated 15,000 to 21,000 Evangelical Christians. While about 60% of Lebanese citizens are Muslims, approximately 1.3 million Lebanese describe themselves as Christians, and most of these are Catholic.

People have asked me if it possible that there are far more Muslim Background Believers in the Middle East than these numbers reflect?

Yes, that’s possible.

As a result of satellite TV and radio ministries, as well as advanced and creative uses of Internet evangelism, it’s certainly possible that there are significantly more MBBs who have not as yet come forward and identified themselves as believers.

That said, the numbers are very difficult to assess and we only included conservative estimates in The Joshua Fund report.

**Conclusion**

But here’s the point – two points, actually, and with these I will close.

**First, Christianity is not dead in the lands of its birth**. It is under attack. It has suffered real losses. But Jesus is keeping His promise – He is building His Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18.)

**Second, now is the time to follow Christ’s lead – we must cross the River, stand with the Church in the Arab world, and truly support our Arab brothers and sisters in Christ as they seek to fulfill the Great Commission in this generation**.

The evidence indicates we are in the early stages of an historic spiritual awakening in the Muslim world.

More Muslims have come to Christ in the last half century than in the last fourteen centuries combined.

To be sure, the Church in the region is still trying to figure out how best to minister to these Muslim converts.

But how can we not come alongside our brothers and sisters and help them in this critical hour?

I’m so grateful that so many Evangelicals love Israel and the Jewish people and have a heart to help Jewish believers advance the Gospel and grow the Messianic Body.

At the same time, I’m also grateful that God is giving a growing number of Evangelicals a love for the Arabs and Iranians and others in the Muslim world and a heart to help the Church on the other side of the River grow, as well.

More and more people are asking my Joshua Fund colleagues and I how they can make a difference in the region. And as we close, let me share with you the four strategies we advise believers to pursue: LEARN, PRAY, GIVE and GO.

* First and foremost, we want to see a growing movement of Christians in the West and around the world LEARNING what God is doing both in Israel and throughout the Arab/Islamic world, the challenges our brothers and sisters are facing, and how we can come alongside them to help.
* Second, we want to mobilize more Christians to be PRAYING faithfully and consistently for the believers in the region, for pastors and their families, and for the salvation and transformation of all who don’t yet know our Coming King. The number one reasons so many Muslims and Jews are coming to faith in Christ is because more Christians are praying for their souls than every before. Imagine the fruit that will come if more believers are mobilized to pray!
* Third, as the Spirit of God draws more and more people in the Epicenter to Christ, Christians with financial resources need to be GIVING cheerfully and sacrificially. The needs are both exciting and enormous. The Joshua Fund is already investing millions of dollars encouraging, refreshing and training pastors and ministry leaders, distributing Bibles to Syrian and Iraqi refugees, equipping Muslim Background Believers to abide in Christ and make other disciples, and in many other projects to strengthen the Church in the Epicenter. But the needs and opportunities – both in Israel and the Arab world – are far greater than we can adequately meet at our current funding levels.
* Fourth and finally, we want to inspire Christians not only to go to Israel and bless Israel and the Jewish people but to GO to the Muslim world to strengthen our brothers and sisters and advance the Kingdom of Christ, and then to GO back home to share what they’ve seen and heard with other believers and mobilize them to be part of fulfilling the Great Commission in the Epicenter.

And this is why – Matthew chapter five.

Jesus crossed the Jordan River for one reason – to reach one man.

From that one man, the Church in the Arab world was born.

What if you and I were willing to follow Jesus across the River?

What if more Christians were willing to learn, pray, give and go to advance Christ’s Kingdom throughout the Epicenter – in Israel and beyond?

How many more souls could be won?

How many more disciples could be made?

How many more brothers and sisters could be encouraged?

How much more joy would we experience if we humbly, boldly, courageously followed our Shepherd, praying all the while, *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”*?

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