

MONDAY, OCTOBER 15

JORDAN VALLEY--JERICHO

JUDEAN WILDERNESS--ROAD TO JERUSALEM

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The young lady in the ticket booth seemed very bored with life. When I enquired about the route of the bus to Jerusalem, she answered tersely that it went down the Jordan Valley. To my question if it was safe to travel through the West Bank, she merely shrugged her shoulders and asked me if I wanted a ticket.

Hannu and I found the Jerusalem bus almost full when we boarded. Two armed soldiers sat in the front; other soldiers were scattered throughout the bus. Noticing that every window was badly cracked, I was praying silently for protection as we headed south out of Tiberias.

After rounding the south-west shore of the Sea of Galilee, we crossed the Jordan, a small tree-shaded stream flowing south towards the Dead Sea. Turning south, we entered the upper Jordan Valley, an extremely lush region with groves of date palms, orchards, cotton plantations, irrigated vegetable fields, and vineyards. Through this wide, fertile plain, the Jordan twists and bends, its path a myriad of serpentine coils. On our right side, the road was bordered by hostile cliffs cut through occasionally by deep gullies. On the eastern side of the valley, the Gilead peaks, carved and worn by wind and winter floods over aeons of time, looked like giant, furrowed sand dunes.

About halfway to Jericho, the desolate hills of Samaria pressed in and the valley became a dry wilderness with a winding path of green trees marking the Jordan's path. Signs of any life on this route became few and far between. Occasionally, green fields spreading out in the centre of the valley indicated an extra water supply from underground springs. One isolated Arab village seemed to be right out of the New Testament; donkeys, sheep, and goats wandered among small mud-brick and stone houses with thatched roofs.

Near the northern end of Jericho, an abandoned refugee camp was a grim reminder of battles of the last few decades and current, unsolved problems. As I thought about the bitter hatred for Jews that had been nurtured in the thousands of Palestinians that had grown up in such camps, it was hard to believe that any solution could avoid another tragic war in the country. If any people need to experience Messianic love, it certainly is these Palestinian refugees.

Suddenly, we were in Jericho, the City of Palms, its flowers and palms a great contrast to the dreadful desolation on its northern outskirts. This large oasis is nurtured from a large underground basin in the Judean Hills that traps winter rains. Springs surface at the foot of the Mount of Temptation, a high mountain brooding over the western edge of Jericho. Some believe that on this mountain was the wilderness where Jesus spent forty days of fasting and temptations. To the east, the mountains of Moab rose like a great rocky rampart. It was from one of these peaks that Moses viewed the Promised Land.

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In the course of about 40 kilometres, we climbed from the hot tropical world of the Jordan Valley, 400 metres below sea level, up to Jerusalem, 760 metres above sea level. Our winding road cut through harsh desert landscapes that appeared unchanged since Bible days. Any one of the occasional Bedouin canopies of woven goat hair could have been Abraham's; these wanderers still live in tents of this coarse heavy fabric, the sackcloth of the Bible, to keep out the sun, sand, and wind. A child riding a donkey around an arid hill could have been in any of the last 30 centuries. However, the water supply for one group of Bedouins was definitely of this century--a large steel water tank on a semitrailer.

We were relieved to get back to Sylvie's in Jerusalem without any unpleasant or threatening incidents and started to plan our activities for the next few days.