

CHAPTER 1

From Touchdown Jesus to Jesus' Touchdown

A former Marine and a conscientious objector were strolling the campus of Notre Dame University.

That sounds like the beginning of a good joke, doesn't it?

Except that it wasn't a joke. It was my real life, and I was on a quest. I was just outside of South Bend, Indiana. Later that afternoon, Craig, my hiking partner, and I would be flying out of Chicago, headed to Israel. That morning, Craig noted that we had several hours to spend ambulating somewhere, and he gave me two options: a local park or the campus of Notre Dame University.

I didn't hesitate. Without question, it would be Notre Dame, home of the Fighting Irish. I am a college football fan. I'm also from Amish Country. The two might not seem to have any connection, but there's a common play on words that gave rise to a mythical "Yoder Dame, home of the Fighting Amish." You can even buy

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T-shirts bearing the words and logos.

However, it wasn't the football stadium that I most wanted to see. I was seeking Touchdown Jesus.

The official name of this large mosaic mural is "The Word of Life." On the wall of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Library, 134 feet high and 68 feet wide, the mural depicts saints and scholars from many eras; and standing above them all, with arms upraised, is the resurrected Jesus, the Source of all words of life, wisdom, and truth.

The mosaic on the library wall is adjacent to the football stadium and used to be easily visible to the television audience as they followed the Fighting Irish football games. Jesus' upraised arms resemble a referee signaling a touchdown, and although additions to the stadium have obscured the wall somewhat, the mural is still nicknamed "Touchdown Jesus."

"So where is this library with Touchdown Jesus?" I asked, as we strolled along.

Craig, the ex-Marine of our opening line, is a minister of the Gospel, and he was too busy explaining the intricacies of hiring pastors to hear my question. He had recently retired, and on our way to Notre Dame, we had driven by the church that he had pastored. Over twenty-seven years' time, he had shepherded a flock that grew from several families into a thriving congregation. Our conversation had been about the many ways in which pastoring (his former job) and restaurant managing (my former job) were similar. One of those similar areas was the task of hiring employees.

On the university campus, my mind had moved on to Touchdown Jesus, but Craig was still talking about the interviewing process for pastoral applicants. One red flag, he noted, was when an applicant arrived for an interview and wasn't carrying a Bible. That detail in itself was enough to eliminate the person from the list of candidates.

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Craig told of some folks who had joined his congregation only after spending a considerable amount of time looking for a suitable church. They wanted a strong, Bible-believing church. So they would park in church parking lots, observing people as they arrived for a service. If folks weren't carrying Bibles, the prospective members fled the scene to stake out another congregation from the parking lot. They finally found their new church home with Craig's flock. This was a church of Bible carriers, but I silently observed that this must have taken place before iPhones and apps with thirty versions of the sacred writ were the "Bibles" folks carry to church.

My attention to Craig's discourse on church polices and hiring practices was interrupted by the scene unfolding before us. Students crisscrossed the campus, going hither and yon to various chambers of higher learning. And there, rising above a cluster of trees, was the wall portraying the likeness of Jesus with outstretched arms.

I took a look, and that was enough for me. *Okay, I've been here, I've seen it. Let's go to Israel.*

We did, however, continue to tour the campus, strolling around the lake and visiting the log chapel where the mission and school first started.

By this time, Craig was talking about conversations he'd had with retired pastors, asking what they would do differently if they could relive their years of ministry. One man said he would rely more on volunteer help instead of paid personnel. I wondered if I could have run restaurants with volunteer help.

Another pastor said he would have hired more judiciously and fired more quickly. "You must get rid of those church cancers sooner rather than later. They can destroy a church." Cancer can invade any troop of employees, whether in church or restaurant or factory. I knew firsthand how deadly it can be.

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The world itself was invaded by a sinister cancer many years ago, and the cancer exists to this day. The antidote was delivered as a baby, born to grow up and take that cancer upon Himself so that others could be healed.

I was eager to go to Bethlehem, to see where Touchdown Jesus had actually touched down.

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Recently, I was the speaker at an Amish Christmas event. I spoke about my trip to Israel and how it had changed the way I now read my Bible.

In a conversation that evening, an Amish man told me that he would love to visit the Holy Land, but flying was prohibited. Church rules, you know. Yes, I certainly knew about church rules; I was raised on them myself. Early in my youth, I thought I'd figured out the guiding principle behind church rules: If anything was fun or exciting, it was probably forbidden. At least, that was the perception that evolved in my teenage mind.

So I asked the Amish man longing for travel, "Do your church leaders know how miserable it is to fly? Are they perhaps under some misunderstanding that it's an enjoyable experience?"

To fly from Chicago to Tel Aviv, Israel, is to spend fifteen hours confined in a tight, metal soup can, breathing air already used by over four hundred other inhabitants. In addition, our flight was blessed with a screaming baby, who apparently had opinions similar to mine on the wonders and pleasures of flying.

In Paris, France, we needed to switch planes and change to the Israeli airline of El Al. This airline is notorious for tight security and thorough examinations of weary, all-night travelers. Our

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interrogation didn't quite reach the level of waterboarding, but the two Israeli security guards sure knew their stuff.

The two guards were young women. In Israel, most young people are required to join the military. Men serve three years; women, two years. A certain group of Orthodox Jews is exempt from military service. These are called *Haredi* Jews, the strictest and most removed from modern culture. Reading the Torah and applying it to every detail of their lives seems to be their one focus.

During our time in Israel, we had conversations with Israeli soldiers who referred to *haredim* (Haredi Jews) as *prayer soldiers*. For obvious reasons, they were not highly regarded by most military personnel. In the United States, a parallel might be the tension between soldiers and conscientious objectors.

My weary fellow sojourner and I were separated for individual interrogations. Craig convinced the young security guard that he wasn't a spy or any other sort of nefarious character and was set free. Then the guard turned her attention to me.

I will admit (and you already know I'm far from politically correct), my first impression was that this young lady was altogether too attractive to be working security. She should have been on television, reading the news or explaining the weather or modeling clothes for some upscale company.

Her good looks, though, were offset by a stone coldness in her eyes. I quickly realized that I'd better not try any of my humorous banter on her. She undoubtedly could have dismantled me, limb from limb, in one blink of those black eyes.

"What is your reason for going to Israel?" she asked.

"I'm going to the Holy Land to hike the Jesus Trail."

She had never heard of that trail until recently—as recently as five minutes ago, apparently. I had overheard Craig explain to

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her the nature of our quest. Craig had also told her that he was a retired minister and was going to guide me around Israel. She could not comprehend what *minister* meant until he explained that it was similar to a Christian *rabbi*. It seemed she was still trying to absorb the meaning of that when she interrogated me.

She perused my passport and then looked up, scrutinizing me.

“You’re Jewish, aren’t you?” I’m convinced the makings of a smile appeared with this question.

“Who, me? No, I’m not Jewish.”

“You have Jewish features.”

“I do?” I asked, astounded.

Then I realized the clue that she had picked up. Many Jewish names end in *-man*. Look at a list of Jewish people, and you’ll see names such as Goldman, Lieberman, Bronfman, Silverman, and Neumann. The name on my passport was *Stutzman*. My mind jumped to my family tree—my paternal grandmother was *Kaufman*. *Hallelujah, I’m Jewish! I’m included with God’s chosen people.*

I kept those thoughts to myself, though. Those black eyes were still all business.

It was doubtful that I was Jewish. But I know I’m still chosen!

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In the Paris airport, Craig called my attention to a scene unfolding directly across the concourse.

“Look,” Craig said. “He’s showing off.”

I’m always fascinated by these little vignettes of life. This one was straight out of the Bible, a scene from Matthew, chapter 23.

That’s the chapter with the “seven woes.” Jesus was dressing down the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, accusing them of

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tying heavy loads upon folks' shoulders and doing nothing to actually help them move. Jesus also denounced their showboating. "You just want people to see you," He said. These hypocrites wore garments bedecked with long tassels down the sides, and they wore phylacteries large enough for all to see.

Unless you are employed at a phylactery factory, you may not know exactly what that is. A phylactery is a small black box, often leather, containing an assortment of Old Testament verses. During prayers, one is attached to the forehead with a band, and the other is attached to the left forearm. It's meant to be a reminder of the words of God.

Jesus was reprimanding those who would sit at prominent places, with their tassels and phylacteries chosen and arranged to attract attention. These religious folks reveled in being seen and acknowledged as rabbis. Jesus, however, was not impressed; and in Matthew 23, He dissects their bad intentions with laser precision.

In a far corner of the concourse of the Paris terminal, a Jewish man was going through the rituals of prayer.

Jews have a duty to pray three times a day, and these prayers normally last up to one half hour. The morning prayer is called *shacharit*. It's a prayer akin to climbing a ladder upward to God. The first few rungs of the ladder are verses of praise, followed by acknowledging the awesome accomplishments of God. Eventually you reach the top rung of the ladder and approach God, making your requests known. Then back toward terra firma you go, with prayers of penitence as you descend from the heavenly realms, back to deal with your earthly day.

I realize that's merely scratching the surface of what prayer means to a Jewish person. But if we're going to talk of scratching the surface, consider the time that Jews spend in prayer. I did the math.

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Three times a day at thirty minutes each—that’s about an hour and twenty-five minutes longer than many Christians. How many of us barely even scratch the surface when it comes to dialogue with God?

This fellow in the corner of the terminal—who, by the way, was the father of the crying child who had serenaded us all the way across the pond—had found a semi-secluded area to have his morning prayers. But as we watched, it was obvious his rituals were not preparing him to pray, but preparing a show. In full view of everyone, he strapped on the phylacteries, making them “wide, and his tassels long.”

I was divided in my opinion of this public prayer warrior. On one hand, he wanted to be seen. On the other hand, he had the courage to be seen. How many of us grafted-in Christians are hesitant to be seen bowing our heads for a short prayer in a public place? And when we “strap on our phylacteries” and hear Scripture read, does it flow over our ears like water over hard ground? Or do the words of God penetrate and revive us?

If I was possibly Jewish, I wondered if I should give some consideration to shopping for phylacteries. I did, eventually. They were over \$200, and I decided to pass, for the time being.

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I don’t pretend to know why, but many Jewish people seem to be smarter than the rest of us. (Or, considering my newly realized heritage, should I say, smarter than the rest of *you*?) Whether in business or medicine or technological inventions, it’s often a Jew who is at the forefront, leading the way.

I’m also aware that many people find Jewish folks a bit irritating. Well, for a certainty, Jesus was a thorn in the side of many folks in

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Israel. And He did warn that His followers would be hated by the world. So whether Jew or Christian, perhaps there are good reasons why the world has its feathers ruffled by the people of God.

I could feel just such an irritation bubbling up among the passengers and flight attendants as we boarded the El Al flight in Paris.

A large contingent of Hasidic Jews were boarding the flight to Tel Aviv. It might be more proper to say there were a few Gentiles joining the Jewish flight. We were definitely in the minority, even though my name was *Stutzman* and I supposedly had “the features.”

Many of the young men had a unique hairstyle under their large, black hats. The curls of hair dangling along the sides of their heads are called *payot*. This style, also known as *side curls*, follows the Old Testament command not to cut the hair at the corners of one's head. The instructions, if you're interested in reading it for yourself, are found in Leviticus 19, verse 27.

These fellows, dressed in black and white and wearing wide-brimmed black hats, could easily have strolled through my native Amish Country and fit right in—except for those long side curls.

As we boarded, the young men milled about, attempting to change seats, to the chagrin of the flight attendants. Older side-curled men stood awaiting assistance for seat switching as well. Some had been assigned a seat next to a woman, but they couldn't sit beside a woman who was not their wife. Sometimes the lady understood and obliged to the move. In other instances, an attendant needed to intervene and facilitate the move.

Once seated, the next matter of complaint was the food. We heard comments that the food wasn't kosher, and thus could not be eaten. The airlines make kosher meals available, and they can be ordered before leaving the ground. Apparently some folks hadn't had the foresight to do that.

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It was a relief—to everyone, I think—when we finally got our flight of God’s chosen people off the ground.

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As I prepared for backpacking in Israel, I had asked Craig what kind of weather to expect. Specifically, I wanted to know: *Do I need my waterproof gear?* I hate hiking in the rain and the misery of being totally soaked while putting one foot in front of the other.

Craig assured me that rain gear was totally unnecessary. “You probably won’t see a drop of rain this time of the year.”

Our flight approached Tel Aviv, and we landed in a rain storm. Disembarking on the runway, where a lineup of busses awaited to take us to customs, I sloshed my way to the bus and wondered what other misinformation had been fed to me.

We had reservations and checked in at the Abraham Hostel Tel Aviv, a large hostel with over 350 beds. Located at a busy downtown intersection, it’s a central base from which to explore. From a rooftop lounge six or seven stories up, we had great views over the city. Tours to many attractions could be booked in the lobby, and we made arrangements for transportation to Nazareth the following morning.