



The Roman ruins shown above are the town of Beit Shan. The dark stones beneath the toppled columns are the streets Jesus walked.

Until a few years ago, no one saw this city. Everything was buried deep beneath the sands of time.

Beit Shan is ancient city only recently revealed. The stone pavers, the agora, the colluseum, the columns lining the way: they are all from the time of Jesus.

Although the excavated site is ancient, the city is much older than 2000 years, or the current level of the dig. Beit Shan is mentioned in 1Samuel as the place where the Philistines hung the dead body of King Saul after defeating him in battle. The battle was more than 3000 years ago. Hence, there is ancient life beneath the pavers and the columns you see above.



Despite what lies below, the Roman period is the most intriguing. And, it is really, really big too.

When you are at Beit Shan, without a doubt, the tour guide will mention a controversy. The controversy was over the speed of archeology. The mayor of Beit Shan was unimpressed with the speed of the archeological efforts.

For many years the archeologists were making progress for history, for scholarship. But this was not helpful for the people of Beit Shan. About thirty years ago, to improve the draw of tourism the mayor speeded things up at the archeological site. He replaced the small shovels and slender rakes with backhoes and bulldozers.

His improvements created a much better experience for the tourist. There is a lot to see. But greater finds were lost. Archeologists believe Beit Shan has 18 different cities built one on top of the other. The backhoes and the bulldozers lifted centuries of artifacts and cast them aside to reach the time of Jesus.

You can imagine the loss of artifacts in each bucket full of earth removed by heavy equipment. It was as if someone dug through your life to a time of adolescence and said, "here she is." For most of us there is a lot of life layered upon our young self. To reach through our life and speed past our decades would be a miss, lot of life would be lost.



When the digging was done and the dust settled, the city of Beit Shan was revealed. As you walk the excavation you get a glimpse of a beautiful Roman city. Even their sidewalks had mosaics!

The city uncovered for us, the Beit Shan at the time of Jesus, was a key part of the “Decapolis.” The Decapolis is an ancient league of 10 cities. The primary connection of the cities was economic.

In the Gospel of Mark it says that Jesus visited the Decapolis. Hence, when you walk on the site you will be walking where Jesus walked. This was the reason for the backhoes. So often in ancient sites, we are standing far above the place where Jesus walked. But not in Beit Shan.

A visit to Beit Shan is important in a number of ways. First it is a good reminder about the care required in archeology. The bulldozers may have brought in more tourist dollars, but a great deal of history was lost in the process. You can't rush excavation. Think: small shovel, paint brush, hand trowel.

Beit Shan is a hard lesson in economics. The speed of the archeologists was of no value to the living city of today; the speed of the mayor destroyed artifacts that could have revealed so much history.

Hence, part of a visit to Beit Shan is a moment to reflect on what you are seeking in life. Are you living like the mayor or the archeologists? Are you looking to make money or are you looking for what is good in life?

Don't be quick to answer.

This is the lesson of Beit Shan.

Five months from a pilgrim path is the time to go slow. This is not the time for quick answers. Make sure you are taking time each day to consider the path you are on. Remember: you have already begun your pilgrim journey.

From here on in, you are not only preparing for a trip, you are excavating the heart. What will be your method of excavation? What will prepare you for the days in the Holy Land? Take time each day to read, ponder, research, pray. Read the Psalms, ponder Ecclesiastes, research 1 Samuel, pray the Sermon on the Mount.

Mostly though take time to listen. Ask the Lord: what do I need to hear as a pilgrim? A pilgrimage is a special path of listening. When you listen, think of the small hand trowel and try to lay aside the busy-ness and force of the bulldozer. When you reach Israel, your heart should be ready— excavated.

Another reason Beit Shan is important is to get the feel of a Roman city. Yes, there are 17 other cities on the site; yes, each one has value and importance. Yet, the Roman Empire is a turning point in world history. Seeing the way the Romans came to Palestine and constructed magnificent cities with roads and water and sewers is truly something to see. Even their ruins are mind boggling.



As you take in the Roman architecture and engineering, I would encourage you to consider something: yes, there are many people who came before; yes, many will come afterward, but your life has a time and a place. What is your time and place? What is the age in which you live? What is your generation? Finding yourself in Beit Shan can only happen if you start paying attention now.

Lastly, Beit Shan is not a religious site. Yes, Jesus walked here; yes, Saul died here. But there are no miracles, no healings, no points of devotion where people have come for centuries to remember. This is first and foremost an archeological site.

As an archeological site it begs the question of why is it part of the “pilgrimage” tour of the Holy Land?

At Beit Shan what I like to remember is the teaching of Jesus: “the kingdom of God is within you.” The Apostle Paul made a similar claim when he encouraged the folks at Corinth to present themselves as a sacrifice and that each person was a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Within us is the kingdom of God, a temple, so to speak. A pilgrimage is intended not only to take you far away, but also deep within. At Beit Shan we are freed to ask, “What is the condition of this temple; How does the kingdom appear to us?” That is what I like about the photos above. Is our kingdom in ruins? Are we able to see what is ancient in us? How do we explore our lives: with a small hand trowel or a bull dozer?

Each of these questions could take months, years perhaps, to answer. Don’t worry if you are unable to give an accurate response or find a quick appraisal. Yet, do set some time aside today to breathe with this question. What is the condition of your heart? Is everything in order or does it look a bit more like the ruins at Beit Shan?

