

Pilgrimage To Jerusalem

The One Who Came Down

A Short Book In Twelve Chapters



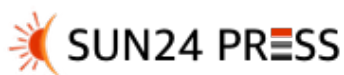
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PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM

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Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a pilgrim on his way to Jerusalem.

He had walked with his backpack for many weeks through heat and dust until he reached a vast, almost desert-like plain nearly a hundred kilometers wide. Near the middle of that empty stretch he set down his pack and left the path a short distance to rest in the thin shade of a solitary palm tree.

Just as he drew near the tree he stepped into a deep sandy pit, nearly five meters to the bottom. The walls were soft and crumbly. Each time he tried to climb they gave way beneath his hands and feet, and he slid back down again.

I

After some hours another pilgrim came along the path, saw the backpack, and walked over to the palm tree. Looking down into the hole he said, “I am a Muslim, and I will pray for you.” He unrolled his prayer rug, turned toward Mecca, and said his prayers. When he finished he rolled the rug up again and called down, “Inshallah. Allah wanted you to fall into this pit. I will continue to pray for you.” Then he continued on his way.

II

Soon afterward another traveler noticed the backpack and came to the edge of the pit. “I am a Hindu,” he said, “and the fact that you fell in there is your karma—your destiny. You must learn to accept it. In the next town I will pray for you in one of our temples and light incense on your behalf.” He bowed slightly and walked on.

III

A little later the next pilgrim appeared. “I am a Buddhist,” he called down. “How fortunate that your Buddha has led you to this place. Here, in complete silence and without anyone disturbing you, you have a rare chance to know yourself deeply. Perhaps you may even reach Nirvana. I only wish I were already that far along.” He sat in quiet meditation before the sandy hole for some time, then rose and left without another word.

IV

Not long after, another pilgrim discovered the hole. “I’m a Free Church Christian,” he said brightly, “and what has happened to you is terrible. I’ll pray with you and for you right now so we can get you out.” He pulled out his guitar and began playing energetic worship music, singing again and again into the pit that the man below should open his heart to Jesus. After nearly two hours he grew tired, took a sip of Red Bull, and switched to quieter songs. When an-

other pilgrim—a young woman—passed by, he gathered his things and followed her down the path.

V

Some time later a woman stopped at the edge. “I am an Evangelical Lutheran Protestant,” she said angrily into the hole, “and you deserve to have fallen in here. You are a patriarchal husband who left his wife and children alone at home while you enjoyed your pilgrimage. I will go to the nearest village, tell your wife, and advise her to file for divorce and seek sole custody of the children.” Before she left she spat into the pit and kicked the backpack several times.

VI

A little later another pilgrim arrived. “I am a Russian Orthodox Christian,” he said, “and unfortunately I cannot help you. This land does not belong to Russia, and you were not baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. Still, I will give you a small bottle of vodka and pray for you. And since you no longer need your sleeping bag, I’m sure you won’t mind if I exchange it for mine.” He tossed the bottle down, swapped the sleeping bags, and continued on his way.

VII

Shortly afterward a Greek Orthodox Christian came along the path. “This is terrible,” he said. “Of course I will help. I will go to the next village and return with assistance.

But the heat is severe, so I can only travel in the early morning and evening. It may take some time.” He then held a long prayer service in the old Orthodox manner beside the hole, slept there through the night, and set off slowly at first light.

VIII

Soon another pilgrim approached the pit. “I am a progressive liberal Catholic,” he said indignantly, “and I find it scandalous that the Catholic Church has provided no special pits for homosexuals and for divorced people who have remarried.” He took a spade and dug several additional holes nearby, placing signs in front of them. “In the next village I will write to the Pope and ask him to place an official Vatican sign at the start of the pilgrimage route, making clear that this journey is explicitly open to these people.” Then he walked away.

IX

Not long after that, another pilgrim came to the hole. “I am a member of the Catholic Curia in Rome,” he said. “You may confess to me, my son.” He placed his stole around his neck and listened quietly and patiently while the man in the pit made his confession. He granted absolution and a blessing. Then he took a bite of his salmon sandwich, sipped his Pellegrino sparkling water, polished his fine leather shoes, wished the pilgrim God’s abundant blessings, and continued on his way.

X

A little later another traveler saw the backpack and came to the edge. “Oh my God, this is cruel,” he cried. “I am a Jew.” He wept bitterly, howled, and struck his head against the palm tree. After a few minutes he said, “I will go to the nearest village and bring help. If you have died of hunger or thirst by the time we return, we will close the pit with your remains. Anyone passing by can drop a small stone on your grave. We will fence it in and declare it part of the State of Israel. You will be recognized as an Israeli citizen. Then we will find and sue everyone who set this trap for you. May the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be with you, my brother.” He turned and left.

XI

Finally a tall pilgrim came along the road. His clothes were worn and faded; he had clearly been traveling for a long time. He walked barefoot and carried only a small backpack. His face was marked by sun and wind. He stopped at the pit and listened quietly while the man below told him what had happened. Then he said, “Make some space down there. I will come down to you.”

He jumped into the pit, gave the pilgrim water and a little bread, and said, “Stand with your feet on my shoulders. I will lift you, and with a little effort on your part you

should be able to climb out.” The pilgrim did as he was told and finally pulled himself free of the hole.

Overjoyed, he thanked the man still standing at the bottom, promised to return with help as soon as possible, and asked his name. The rescuer only told him to go quickly and bring help.

XII

The pilgrim ran as fast as he could toward the nearest village, stopping once or twice to drink from a cactus along the way. When he reached the village he told the people what had happened. A jeep was found at once, and a small group set out with him.

But when they arrived and looked down into the pit, it was empty.

Next to the pit was a rope, lying in the sand at the top.